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# The Sisterhood: Black Women, Black Feminism, And The Women's Liberation Movement

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# The Sisterhood: Black Women, Black Feminism, And The Women's Liberation Movement

## Abstract

This dissertation, "The Sisterhood: Black Women, Black Feminism, and the Women's Liberation Movement" traces the development of second-wave Black feminism as an intellectual and activist tradition in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing on published and unpublished literary and academic works and extensive archival materials including personal correspondence, I argue that a cohort of Black women novelists, poets, critics, and academics used their work and social networks to build a distinct Black feminist movement while simultaneously imagining and producing new possibilities for political and personal relationships with individual white women and the larger feminist movement.

This dissertation contributes to ongoing discussions in the fields of Black women's intellectual history, Black feminism, and women's studies in three ways: This dissertation contributes to these ongoing conversations in three ways: (1) by enlarging what has become a limited genealogy of second-wave Black feminist to include lesser-known and under-studied groups and women; (2) by illuminating the connections between the creative and political work Black feminists do including how Black feminists' creative work (e.g. poetry and fiction) is a crucial form of theorizing the development of a Black feminist tradition; and (3) by explaining how Black feminists were consistently in dialogue with white feminists pressuring them to expand the mainstream feminist political platform to be more inclusive and attentive to women of color's concerns.

This dissertation is a recuperative project but also an effort to examine the robust, multi-layered contributions of Black women outside of mainstream second-wave feminist and Black Nationalist organizations. Tracing the circuits Black feminists navigated in their activist and intellectual work helps us to better understand the contemporary moment and to critically appraise contemporary, popular invocations of Black feminism as descendants of a historically specific movement and moment of Black feminist creativity and activism.

## Degree Type

Dissertation

## Degree Name

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

## Graduate Group

Africana Studies

## First Advisor

Herman Beavers

## Keywords

African American Literature, Black feminism, Feminism

## Subject Categories

African American Studies | American Studies | Women's Studies

THE SISTERHOOD: BLACK WOMEN, BLACK FEMINISM, AND THE WOMEN'S  
LIBERATION MOVEMENT

SaraEllen Strongman

A DISSERTATION

in

Africana Studies

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2018

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THE SISTERHOOD: BLACK WOMEN, BLACK FEMINISM, AND THE WOMEN'S  
LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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SaraEllen Strongman

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been incredibly fortunate to have some of the best mentorship and support during my time at the University of Pennsylvania. I will be forever grateful to the people who nurtured me as a young scholar. First and foremost I must thank my amazing dissertation committee. My advisor, Dr. Herman Beavers, always had confidence in me, even when I doubted myself. He has modeled for me what it is to be both a rigorous scholar and a caring mentor and instilled in me the importance of being “in my office” for those who come after me. I will strive to live up to his example for the rest of my career. Dr. Barbara Savage knew I was an historian before I did. Her humor has been a gift in the midst of writing this dissertation and her candor and forthright feedback has made my writing so much stronger. Her guidance first sent me into the archives and that has made all the difference. Dr. Salamishah Tillet has been unfailingly generous with her time and energy. Her work as a public intellectual has been inspiring and changed how I think about the possibilities of the academy. She always asked the tough questions and pushed me to try new and exciting approaches to my interdisciplinary work.

I am grateful to the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Research Fellowship, the Social Science Research Council, the Fontaine Society, the Rose Manuscript and Rare Book Library at Emory University, the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University, the Penn MMUF program, and the Department of Africana Studies for generous funding and support of this project.

My Africana Studies family has enriched my time here at Penn immensely. I could not have done it without my brilliant cohort-mates Osei Alleyne, Celina de Sa, Josslyn Luckett, and Natalie Shibley. The entire department faculty have been supportive and generous with their time. I want especially to thank Drs. Camille Charles and Heather Williams for their work in their roles as leaders of the department and the center. The hugs, kind words, smiles, and true deep care of Ms. Teya Campbell, Ms. Carol Davis, and Ms. Gale Garrison have buoyed my heart in difficult times and made celebrating my successes all that much sweeter.

I have also benefitted from the support and brilliance of friends. Julia Cox, Rachel Corbman, Leslie Jones, Clare Mullaney, Omari Weekes, and Mary Zaborskis and many others have all been amazing colleagues and true friends.

My Penn Mellon family has been a refuge from the stress and pressures of graduate school and I have *always* looked forward to Tuesday afternoons. Thank you to Dr. Valarie Swain-Cade McCoullum and Pat Ravenell for the opportunity to work with

amazing young scholars and for their unwavering support. I hope to make them proud. It has also been a privilege to work with Penn undergraduates in MMUF. It was an honor to be around the table with Camara Brown, Liza Davis, Imani Davis, Kelsey Desir, Rob Franco, Abrina Hyatt, Kassidi Jones, Erich Kessel, Sophie Lindner, Amari Mitchell, Elise Mitchell, Jose Romero, Isaac Silber, Spencer Stubbs and Melanie White.

Thank you also to the White Dog Café, which nourished me during the writing of this dissertation. Special thanks to bartenders Miller Reed and Tim Wiley.

Finally, I must thank my parents Esther and John Strongman. They were the first to instill in me a love of books and learning. They have never doubted me or questioned my decision to pursue a doctorate. Their pride in me is bottomless and I am so lucky to be their daughter.

## ABSTRACT

### THE SISTERHOOD: BLACK WOMEN, BLACK FEMINISM, AND THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

SaraEllen Strongman

Herman Beavers

This dissertation, “The Sisterhood: Black Women, Black Feminism, and the Women’s Liberation Movement” traces the development of second-wave Black feminism as an intellectual and activist tradition in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing on published and unpublished literary and academic works and extensive archival materials including personal correspondence, I argue that a cohort of Black women novelists, poets, critics, and academics used their work and social networks to build a distinct Black feminist movement while simultaneously imagining and producing new possibilities for political and personal relationships with individual white women and the larger feminist movement.

This dissertation contributes to ongoing discussions in the fields of Black women’s intellectual history, Black feminism, and women’s studies in three ways: This dissertation contributes to these ongoing conversations in three ways: (1) by enlarging what has become a limited genealogy of second-wave Black feminist to include lesser-known and under-studied groups and women; (2) by illuminating the connections between the creative and political work Black feminists do including how Black

feminists' creative work (e.g. poetry and fiction) is a crucial form of theorizing the development of a Black feminist tradition; and (3) by explaining how Black feminists were consistently in dialogue with white feminists pressuring them to expand the mainstream feminist political platform to be more inclusive and attentive to women of color's concerns.

This dissertation is a recuperative project but also an effort to examine the robust, multi-layered contributions of Black women outside of mainstream second-wave feminist and Black Nationalist organizations. Tracing the circuits Black feminists navigated in their activist and intellectual work helps us to better understand the contemporary moment and to critically appraise contemporary, popular invocations of Black feminism as descendants of a historically specific movement and moment of Black feminist creativity and activism.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgment.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>V</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One: Building Bridges: Alice Walker and Early Second Wave Black Feminism.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter Two: The Power of Poetry: Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Feminist Literary Culture in the 1970s and 1980s .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Black Women’s Studies: Black Women in the National Women’s Studies Association Transforming the Academy .....</b>	<b>177</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Sisterhood and Home Girls: Black Feminists’ Intra-racial Organizing and Publishing .....</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>282</b>

## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to the Black feminist anthology *Home Girls*, editor Barbara Smith writes,

Despite continual resistance to women of color defining our specific issues and organizing around them, it is safe to say in 1982 that we have a movement of our own... Yet the feminism of women of color, particularly of Afro-American women, has wrought many changes during these years, has had both obvious and unrecognized impact upon the development of other political groupings and upon the lives and hopes of countless women.<sup>1</sup>

Smith goes on to list the issues that Black women and other women of color have organized around including reproductive justice, violence against women, international women's issues and politics, and homophobia, in addition to doing cultural work like founding journals for Black women's writing. Smith argues that all of these Black feminist endeavors are informed by a central tenet of Black feminism: "the simultaneity of oppression."<sup>2</sup> The idea that one's experiences are shaped by multiple identities, simultaneously, and that the interaction of those identities and their attendant oppressions can create unique, new forms of oppression has come to be known as intersectionality.

Coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989,<sup>3</sup> intersectionality is perhaps the primary contribution of Black feminist thought and certainly the most well-known. The idea that

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Smith, "Introduction," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), xxxiii

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* xxxiv

<sup>3</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139.

Black women's experience cannot be adequately captured by the single-axis analysis of racism or sexism, can be traced back to Black women's arrival on the continent and, prior to Crenshaw's intervention, had been described many times: in Sojourner Truth's declaration "Ain't I a woman?" in 1848 at the Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls; Fran Beale's 1969 "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female"; the Combahee River Collective's formulation of the "simultaneity of oppression" in their 1977 statement; and numerous other locations. But the primacy of intersectionality today in Black feminist theory and indeed feminist theory in general has occasioned a tendency towards ahistoricism. Black feminism as we know it today is sometimes treated as though it has always been. These framings obscure a specific history of Black women's intellectual thought and their engagement with social movements. Although the idea of intersectionality has a long history, its explicit and consistent deployment in feminist activism occurred at the moment in which Black women began calling themselves Black feminist and distinguishing their intellectual and activist tradition from the mainstream, white-dominated women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It is out of this moment, during what is popularly known as the second-wave<sup>4</sup> of feminism that Smith is writing.

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<sup>4</sup> Incisive critiques of the wave metaphor in feminist historiography abound but I have chosen in this project not to engage them. Instead, I use "second-wave" primarily to mark a historical moment beginning during the decline of the Civil Rights Movement and in the midst of multiple social movements: Black Nationalism, the Women's Liberation Movement, etc. I also find "second-wave" to be a useful way to signal that Black feminism has always existed in the United States and that my project focuses on a particular iteration and intensification of organizing and theorizing during the 1970s and 1980s. I focus on this time period because it was a heightened period of Black feminist organizing and theorizing and because it is during this period that Black women began widely calling themselves "Black feminists," that they named and claimed their

This dissertation analyzes the historical moment Smith is writing out of, the 1970s and 1980s, in order to trace the development of second-wave Black feminism as an intellectual and activist tradition in the United States. I argue that a cohort of Black women novelists, poets, critics, and academics used their work and social networks to build a distinct Black feminist movement while also working with second-wave feminists and within their organizations to reshape and expand the predominantly white feminist movement's political platform. That is to say, Black women during this period were constantly engaging with white feminists and advocating for their concerns and investments at the same time they did the intellectual work of building second-wave Black feminism.

My project is interdisciplinary and contributes to three ongoing scholarly conversations across several fields: (1) work on Black women's art and (and *as*) politics; (2) histories of Black women's activism, especially revisionist histories of Black women's involvement in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements; and (3) intellectual histories of Black and other women of color's feminism. This dissertation contributes to these ongoing conversations in three ways: (1) by enlarging what has become a limited genealogy of second-wave Black feminist to include lesser-known and under-studied groups and women; (2) by illuminating the connections between the creative and political work Black feminists do including how Black feminists' creative work (e.g. poetry and fiction) is a crucial form of theorizing the development of a Black feminist tradition; and (3) by explaining how Black feminists were consistently in

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own politics distinct from mainstream feminism, and consciously worked built their *own* movement under the banner of feminism.

dialogue with white feminists pressuring them to expand the mainstream feminist political platform to be more inclusive and attentive to women of color's concerns.

Angela Davis, Ruth Feldstein, and Cheryl Clarke, along with others, have explored the political content of Black women's art. In her study of Black women blues singers, Davis argues "their recorded performances divulge unacknowledged traditions of feminist consciousness if working class black communities."<sup>5</sup> Through close readings of lyrics and recorded performances, Davis reveals how Black women blues and jazz performers deployed frequently subversive ideas about sexuality and gender identity in their work. In doing so, she argues, they created cultural spaces for community building that echo the "personal politics" of later consciousness raising groups in the second-wave feminist movement.<sup>6</sup>

In *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement*, Feldstein examines the work and careers of six Black women entertainers during the Civil Rights movement: Miriam Makeba, Nina Simone, Abbey Lincoln, Diahann Carroll, and Cicely Tyson. She argues, "All six women used their status as celebrities to support black activism" during this period, through explicit appeals and endorsements as well as "performance strategies" that interweaved their artistic expression and their political positions. At the same time, Feldstein demonstrates, each

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), xi.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* 44

woman played with gender and gender roles in her work and “performed black womanhood in new and distinct ways.”<sup>7</sup>

Cheryl Clarke’s study of Black women poets and the Black Arts Movement, *After Mecca*, examines the work of Black women poets in relation to the Black Power and Black Arts movements. She argues that poets like Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Ntozake Shange deployed many of the narratives of racial pride from Black Nationalist ideology in their work while frequently subverting Black Power’s conservative gender roles. Clarke demonstrates how black women poets engaged with Black Power politics while constructing new spaces and modes for Black women’s political thought and activism.<sup>8</sup>

I enter into this ongoing conversation about the role of Black women’s art in political moments by linking Black feminists’ creative writing to their activism. I situate Black women’s creative writing—both poetry and fictional prose—alongside their nonfiction and critical prose as important instances of political theorizing. For example, I argue that Pat Parker’s poems about gendered violence, like “Womanslaughter,” meditates upon the trauma of violence against women while also critiquing state complicity in its perpetuation and acting as a rallying cry for feminist organizing around the issue. Like her Black feminist contemporaries, Parker’s creative work is not just linked to but a part of her political activism and, in fact, a site in which she theorizes the productive possibilities of her feminism and coalitional politics.

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Cheryl Clarke, *“After Mecca”: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005)

A rich, nuanced, and growing body of scholarship has expanded our understanding of Black women's involvement in post-war progressive social movements. In this project, I draw both upon the recovery work done by such scholars and their important theorizing around the nature and history of Black women's political thought and activism in the United States. For example, Dayo Gore and Erik McDuffie have unearthed Black women's important work as part of various radical and New Left organizations and how they brought their analysis of the intersections of race, class, and gender to a movement frequently thought of as led by white, working-class men. Both have asserted Black women's central role in movement organizations as both political and cultural leaders during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.<sup>9</sup>

There is now an abundance of work that reconsiders Black women's roles in the U.S. Civil Rights movement. Belinda Robnett's formulation of "bridge leadership," although contested, provided a useful frame for recovering the previously unacknowledged but crucial work Black women did as part of the civil rights movement. Although they were not as visible as charismatic male leaders, Robnett argues that Black women's on-the-ground, day-to-day work at the local level was integral to the operation of movement activities.<sup>10</sup> Barbara Ransby and Jeanne Theoharis's biographies of Ella Baker and Rosa Parks reveal how these two Black women were leaders in the movement,

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<sup>9</sup> See Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2012) and Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for freedom: black women, American communism, and the making of black left feminism* \*Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> See Belinda Robnett, *How long? How long?: African-American women in the struggle for civil rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

if not necessarily “bridge leaders.”<sup>11</sup> Both studies enrich our understanding of two of the Movement’s most iconic female figures by unearthing a fuller, more complex version of each woman’s life story as well as foregrounding the sophistication of their political thought and activism. Theoharis, for example, debunks the myth of the spontaneous origins of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the portrayal of Parks as “only” an exhausted seamstress by recounting Parks’s long history of activism with the NAACP and other organizations. In doing so, she revises the mythology surrounding Parks that has made her a symbol of the movement and effectively erased her as an activist in her own right. Similarly, Ransby reveals the brilliance and skill of Baker the organizer and mentor behind the scenes of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s (SNCC) campaigns.

Danielle McGuire’s *At the Dark End of the Street: Women, Rape, and Resistance* recuperated a previously forgotten history of Black women’s leadership in the protest of sexual violence and how activism around rape was an important component of both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. McGuire revises the narrative of the Civil Rights movement as a struggle between black and white men, instead centering black women’s fight against sexual and sexualized violence as a key component of the Movement. McGuire argues that sexual violence and interracial rape were the battleground upon which the Civil Rights movement began and, furthermore, traces the

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<sup>11</sup> See Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) and Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Ms. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).



crucial language of gender and respect for black femininity that undergirded much of the Movement and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in particular.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars have done similar recovery work around Black women's involvement in Black Power organizations. Robyn Spencer, Ashley D. Farmer, Bettie Collier-Thomas and Vincent P. Franklin have countered the myth that Black women were only active as mothers and caretakers within Black Nationalist organizations and shown how they were active participants and leaders in political thought and activism.

As part of this trend in revisiting Black women's political activism and leadership, scholars have also re-examined Black women's involvement in the Women's Liberation Movement. While Winifred Breines has argued that black feminism and black feminist organizations emerged in reaction to perceived limits of the mainstream, white feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s,<sup>13</sup> work by Kimberley Springer and Ann Valk has pushed back against her formulation and argued that black women's feminist organizations developed "parallel" to white women's and that interracial organizing and cooperation was, at times, a key component of successful feminist activism. In *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*, Springer situates black women's formal organizations as both contemporaries of the white, mainstream feminist movement and part of a much longer tradition of feminist consciousness and activism by

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<sup>12</sup> Danielle McGuire, *At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> See Wini Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of Black and White Women in the Feminist Movement* (2006).

black women in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Valk's study of Black women's anti-racist and feminist activism in Washington, D.C., *Radical Sisters*, demonstrates that low income black women were at the forefront of feminist organizing around welfare and collaborated with white women around issues of sexual assault. Valk argues that the<sup>15</sup> goals and issues of black feminism and black feminists were not always at odds with those of white feminists and, like Springer, counteracts myths that black women were not a part of the second-wave feminist movement. In her masterful biography of Black feminist Flo Kennedy, Sherie Randolph has also explored Black women's involvement and leadership in second-wave feminist activism.<sup>16</sup>

I am indebted to the extensive recovery work done by these scholars as it has provided me with the historical context in which the women I study came of age and did their work. I have also benefited from their reliance upon personal papers and correspondence to augment the official narratives of organizational records that frequently elide the diverse individuals and types of labor that go are necessary to successful political organizing. And, although I do not fruitfully engage the debates about the wave analogy of feminist historiography, the disruption of commonly accepted timelines and models of second-wave feminism by scholars like Springer, Rosalynn Baxandall, Benita Roth, and Becky Thompson has been generative for my own thinking about Black feminism's relationship, politically and temporally, to second-wave

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<sup>14</sup> Kimberley Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968- 1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.)

<sup>15</sup> Ann Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Sherie M. Randolph, *Florynce "Flo" Kennedy: The Life of a Black Feminist Radical* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

feminism.<sup>17</sup> Thinking about Black feminism not as an afterwards or a response to but a new iteration of a long history of Black women's thinking about racialized gender and sexuality in the United States has shaped my both/and framing of Black feminism as an autonomous movement in and of itself that was also in constant dialogue with mainstream, white-dominated feminism. The return to bottom-up history that listens to voices and stories that have not always been centered led me to prioritize the work of under-studied women like Parker and to attempt to complicate our understanding of women whose careers and work we think we know, such as Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith.

Finally, my approach to this project and its content has been greatly influenced by work in the emerging field of Black women's intellectual history. Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage together edited a masterful volume to announce this field to the world and have paved the way for exciting projects on Black women's intellectual thought like Brittney Cooper's recent *Beyond Respectability*.<sup>18</sup> As they write in the introduction to their groundbreaking volume, *Toward An Intellectual History of Black Women*, "To construct a field from the standpoint of black women takes us from the essential work of recovery through the development of alternative sources

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<sup>17</sup> See Rosalyn Baxandall, "Re-Visioning the Women's Liberation Movement's Narrative: Early Second Wave African American Feminists." *Feminist Studies* 27.1 (2001): 225-245; Benita Roth, *Separate roads to feminism: Black, Chicana, and White feminist movements in America's second wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Becky Thompson, "Multiracial feminism: Recasting the chronology of second wave feminism." *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 337-360.

<sup>18</sup> Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

and modes of analysis.”<sup>19</sup> I have adopted these approaches and centered Black women’s voices, their ideas about themselves and their politics and their identities, in this project. In line with their charge, this dissertation is a recuperative project but also an attempt to shift how we talk about Black feminism as an ideology and a movement and the Black women who built it.

In this project, I deploy an intersectional Black feminist framework that considers the combined, simultaneous effects and interactions of the categories of race, gender, and sexuality on individuals’ lives to analyze how Black women’s multiple identities simultaneously shaped their experiences, work, and relationship to feminism as a political and personal project. I also utilize methodologies from literary studies, queer theory, African American Studies, and intellectual history to analyze published literary and scholarly works and extensive archival materials, especially unpublished manuscripts and correspondence, in order to illustrate how Black feminists were communicating with each other, building networks, and linking their artistic and academic work to their political beliefs. This dissertation is a recuperative project but also an effort to examine the robust, multi-layered contributions of Black women outside of mainstream second-wave feminist and Black Nationalist organizations. Tracing the circuits Black feminists navigated in their activist and intellectual work helps us to better understand the contemporary moment and to critically appraise contemporary, popular invocations of Black feminism

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<sup>19</sup> Introduction to *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, eds. Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 4.

as descendants of a historically specific movement and moment of Black feminist creativity and activism.

The four chapters in this dissertation are loosely chronological but primarily organized thematically. Each chapter examines a site or mode of Black feminist theorizing and activism—e.g. feminist literary culture and women’s studies conferences. This structure allows me to analyze Black women’s interpersonal and institutional relationships in each location and how their interaction produced rich bodies of Black feminist thought. In each chapter, in addition to analyzing published literary and scholarly works, I draw heavily on archival materials in *order* to illustrate how Black feminists were communicating with each other, building networks, and linking their creative and intellectual work to their political beliefs.

Chapter one, “Building Bridges: Alice Walker and Early Second Wave Black Feminism,” examines writer and critic Alice Walker’s early career as an example of the evolution of Black women’s political investments during the 1970s. Although Walker’s most well-known and most recognizably “feminist” work is her novel *The Color Purple*, published in 1982, I argue her interest in feminism is traceable to much earlier in her career. In this chapter, analyze the first decade of Walker’s publishing career focusing on her first two poetry collections—*Once* and *Revolutionary Petunias*—and her second novel *Meridian* (1976). Specifically, I read Walker’s multi-genre writings about the Civil Rights movement as a bridge between Black radical political movements of the 1960s and second-wave feminism. Analyzing the content of Walker’s writing alongside her career trajectory also illuminates the tensions between Black Nationalist cultural politics

and early second-wave Black feminism and how Black feminists navigated these conflicts. Thus her meditations on race and gender document emerging second-wave Black feminist consciousness.

The second chapter, “The Power of Poetry: Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Feminist Literary Culture in the 1970s and 1980s,” analyzes the work and careers of two Black, lesbian poets—Audre Lorde and Pat Parker—to examine how the advent and rapid growth of a women’s literary public and feminist book culture in the 1970s and 80s brought Black women writers, especially poets, into contact with white women, leading them to theorize their Black feminist politics and to dialogue with white feminists about issues of race and sexuality. In the first part of the chapter, I analyze how Parker explored the politics and affective risks of interracial relationships in her poetry and her life. In addition to reading how these ideas are fleshed out in her earlier poetry collections, *Child of Myself* and *Pit Stop*, I discuss her experiences during a 1975 cross-country reading tour. During this tour, Parker read primarily at feminist bookstores and organizations but despite a shared politics she frequently encountered frustrating ignorance about race and racial difference. In the second half of this chapter I discuss Lorde’s editorial activism. Lorde was one of the few black women at the time in an editorial position and thus with the ability to decide who and what was published. Lorde used her editorial power to promote and support other black women writers. Lorde worked for a time as poetry editor at the literary magazines *Amazon Quarterly* and *Chrysalis*. At both publications, Lorde actively sought to publish the work of women of color and enroll the white women on the editorial boards in her inclusive project. Like Parker, a large part of Lorde’s Black

feminist praxis was, at least for a time, about educating white women around difference, so I also discuss a series of letters between Lorde and her close friend the white lesbian poet Adrienne Rich in which they discuss the racial politics of Lorde's split from *Chrysalis* and how race and racism affect their feminism and their friendship.

In the third chapter, *Black Women's Studies: Black Women in the National Women's Studies Association Transforming the Academy*," looks to the first decade of the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) existence for instances of Black women's activism and intervention in academe in the 1980s. The NWSA is a useful example because it is a professional association that many Black feminist academics were involved in and, theoretically, explicitly sought to recruit women of color to the organization. I argue that Black women's sustained critique of the association's racial politics and their work to transform the organization was a microcosm of Black women's larger interventions in women's studies and the academy in general during this period. Specifically I chronicle Black women's interventions into official NWSA organizational policy and conduct, especially as keynote or featured speakers. From Smith's talk "Racism and Women's Studies" at the inaugural NWSA conference in 1979 to the walk-out staged at the 1990 conference in protest of the unceremonious firing of the association's lone Black staff member, Black women, along with other women of color, repeatedly took the association to task for failing to live up to its stated mission of inclusion. Their critiques and protests lead to material changes in the association's operations and have heavily influenced the shape the association has taken today.

In this chapter, I also explore Black women scholars' field-building and community-making. In addition to discussing the founding and operation of the *SAGE* the first scholarly journal devoted to the study of Black women, I analyze how Black women professors were behind the 1991 "In Defense of Ourselves" campaign to support Anita Hill during the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas and their subsequent organization of an academic conference in 1994, with a similar name, devoted to Black women in the academy. Throughout this chapter I argue that Black women in the academy refused to separate their scholarly pursuits from their anti-racist and feminist activism.

The final chapter, "Sisterhood and Home Girls: Black Feminists' Intra-racial Organizing and Publishing," examines two informal Black feminist groups, The Sisterhood and The Black Feminist Retreats. The creation of these groups reflects the frequent isolation Black feminists felt in the 1970s and 1980s and how Black feminist organizing created spaces for Black feminists to theorize and to build personal relationships. In this chapter I analyze (1) how the two groups came to be and also (2) how the personal relationships and political thinking they generated initiated the flowering of Black feminism in the 1980s.

The Sisterhood was an amorphous organization, part writing group, part social hour, part activist group, founded in 1977 that met monthly in New York City for about a year. The attendees included Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Michele Wallace, among others. Although it began as a "chitlins & champagne dinner for a kind of Black Sisterhood of the Spirit Happy Purpose," as described by June Jordan in a letter



to Audre Lorde, the group eventually turned their attention to the politics of publishing and although they never enacted their plans, schemed to create their own publishing house and writers' agency to help promote the work of Black women writers and poets.

The Black Feminist Retreats were a series of seven events held periodically from 1977 to 1980 that brought together Black feminists from up and down the East coast and even a few participants from Chicago to discuss Black feminism, organizing, and other issues in the service of connecting women with like minded peers and consciously building a Black feminist movement. Attendees included the organizers and co-authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement—Barbara and Beverly Smith and Demita Frazier—as well as Audre Lorde, Lorraine Bethel, Cheryl Clarke, and Gloria “Akasha” Hull. The retreats featured intense workshops around sexuality and activism as well as cultural sharing and even a few parties. Eventually the retreat women, too, turned to publishing and controlling the means of production as a necessary means of supporting Black women writers and proliferating Black feminism. They lobbied publications to be more inclusive and planned to release their own resource book. The retreat women's planned book was never published but they, the retreat attendees, made up many of the contributors to *Conditions 5: The Black Women's Issue* and its offspring *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*.

In addition to exploring how these groups connected women who would go on to be close friends, lovers, and collaborators, I consider how both groups understood the importance of publishing to the development and proliferation of Black feminist thought

and how their members went on to publish foundational Black feminist texts that shaped the field as we know it today.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### **Building Bridges: Alice Walker and the Early Second Wave Black Feminism**

#### *Introduction*

When Alice Walker first publicly read her groundbreaking essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” in 1973 at Radcliffe, the power of her words brought women in the audience to tears. According to Marcia Ann Gillespie, “By the time Alice finished you could hear sisters sobbing all over the room. It was as if she’d brought forth all the ancestors and allowed us to collectively grieve what black women had never been able to achieve.”<sup>20</sup> Although Alice Walker spent her early career writing for and about Black Southern people, her groundbreaking essay was not first published in a Black periodical. Instead of appearing in *Essence*, a magazine for Black women, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” was first published in *Ms.*, a magazine run by and marketed to white feminists. Gillespie, who was the editor of *essence* at the time, has said, “When I found out the essay was going to be published in *Ms.*, I was irate. ‘The white girls don’t even get this; they don’t deserve it,’ is what I recall thinking to myself.”<sup>21</sup>

Walker’s intervention in feminist discourse in “In Search of Our Mothers Gardens” and the other essays in the eponymous collection published in 1983, have become foundational theoretical texts in Black feminism. It was in this collection that Walker coined and defined the now popular term “womanism.” According Walker, a

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<sup>20</sup> Evelyn C. White, *Alice Walker: A Life*. (New York: WW Norton and Co., 2004), 270

<sup>21</sup> White 270

womanist is “a black feminist or a feminist of color.” Walker’s new term expanded the terms of what seemed in the 1970s and 1980s as a white-dominated feminist movement, replacing it with a more inclusive and broad-reaching ideology: “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”<sup>22</sup> Like the Combahee River Collective statement almost a decade prior, Walker’s womanism connected gender and sexual oppression to other larger, structural social issues. In addition to loving “music, “dance,” the moon,” “the Spirit,” “love and food and roundness,” Walker’s womanist loves “struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.”<sup>23</sup> The centrality of radical, inclusive politics and struggle in Walker’s alternative, feminist vision reflects her personal, political commitments, which run through her writing and her personal life.

The contradiction of publishing “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” in *Ms.* encapsulates the paradox of Walker’s early career. Walker’s groundbreaking essay is about the intellectual and artistic work of Black women, but many of her most significant personal and professional relationships were with white women. For example, the poet Muriel Rukeyser was her teacher at Sarah Lawrence College and a longtime mentor who introduced her to her first literary agent and assisted her in getting her first book of poetry published. And Gloria Steinem, whom she first encountered while working at *Ms.* magazine, became a lifelong friend.

It seems that “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” did not go to *Essence* or another Black publication because of Walker’s strained relationship with the Black

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<sup>22</sup>Alice Walker, “Womanism” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xii.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid* xii

literati. Although Hattie Gossett suggested Walker as a candidate to head *Essence* during the planning phases for the magazine, her nomination was dismissed. Gossett explains, “The people at *Essence* resented Alice because she wasn’t going through gatekeeping niggerati.” Rather than coming up through Black-run publications and “paying her dues,” Walker’s first book of poetry had been midwived into publication by Rukeyser, a white feminist poet, and, even worse (in many’s minds), Walker was married to a white man. Walker’s friendships with white women and especially her marriage to a white man caused many in Black literary circles, which at the time consisted of many Black Nationalist writers, to ignore or even actively shun her. Her personal and professional choices reflect this phenomenon.

During her early career, Walker moved in and out of spaces and institutions as it suited her and her goals. For example, she originally took a job at *Ms.* magazine because it would allow her time to work on her own writing. When her relationship with many of the staff soured because of their handling of racial politics, she quit. Walker’s freedom to move between spaces reflects the complexity of her personal politics. As she moved from position to position and through her career, Walker brought together ideas from disparate places and linked them. Her beliefs and work continuously link different social movements and ideologies, bridging the gaps between them.

Walker’s writing—fiction, poetry, and non-fiction—spans the 1960s through to the present. As such, her career is a rich site to investigate the development of U.S. Black feminism as an intellectual tradition. In particular, her work reveals the place of gender consciousness within the Civil Rights Movement, how Black women continued to explore

feminism in the post-Movement years, and the increasing urgency of radical feminist and anti-racist thought and activism during the Reagan years. In addition to spanning decades and movements, Walker's life and work coalesce at the intersection/overlap of three competing ideologies that characterized political culture in the 1960s and 1970s: the non-violent methods of the Civil Rights Movement that drew on Christian theology, the Black Nationalism of the Black Power Movement, and the Women's Liberation Movement. Black Feminism emerges from the interstices of these movements.<sup>24</sup>

As such, I argue that Walker's work and writing *bridge* the CRM, Black Power, and Women's Movements. My use of "bridge" does not only signal how she connects the two but is also a play on of Belinda Robnett's model of black women's leadership during the Civil Rights Movement. In her book *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*, Robnett uses "bridge leadership" to characterize the different, diverse, and less visible ways that black women's on-the-ground, day-to-day labor was crucial to the success and maintenance of the Movement.<sup>25</sup> Although charismatic, male leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr., have come to represent the mainstream Movement, many women were also leaders, but in a different, less visible way. Robnett characterizes many black women as, "*Bridge Leaders* who utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community; and between prefigurative strategies (aimed at individual

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<sup>24</sup> Here I am borrowing from Springer's argument about black feminism's "interstitial politics." See Kimberley Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Belinda Robnett, *How long? How long?: African-American women in the struggle for civil rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

change, identity, and consciousness) and political strategies (aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions).”<sup>26</sup> Bridge leaders bridged the Movement organization and the communities they represented and worked with; they “were able to cross the boundaries between the public life of a movement organization and the private spheres of adherents and political constituents.”<sup>27</sup> According to Robnett, women were more likely to be bridge leaders because their gender sometimes prevented them from holding formal leadership roles.

Similarly Walker’s work *bridges* the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, and Women’s Liberation Movements, highlighting shared affinities and linkages that are often overshadowed by differences and later divides. Reading these texts alongside the histories and primary texts of the era they purport to document reveals how black women negotiated the politics of gender, sexuality, *and* race during this turbulent era, narrating a pre-history of the conflicts that were to come between white and black women in the following years. Of particular interest to my project is Walker’s novel *Meridian* (1976), several of her short stories, her poetry collection *Once* (1968), and her essays and correspondence. Paying critical attention to the ways in which Walker depicts the interplay of race, gender, and sexuality for black women—both her characters and herself—reveals a black feminist politics that would shape future generations.

### *Historiography*

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<sup>26</sup> Robnett 19

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

The publication of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology* in 1970s was a watershed moment for black feminism because it both reflected the black feminist writing and activism that had taken place during the 1960s and presaged the continued growth of black feminist activism and criticism in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>28</sup> In the introduction to the volume, Bambara outlines her reasons for compiling the volume and the cultural and political milieu in which it was produced:

What characterizes the current movement of the 60's is a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other. Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism; American or imperialism...depending on your viewpoint and your terror. Our energies now seem to be invested in and are in turn derived from a determination to touch and to unify. What typifies the current spirit is an embrace, an embrace of the community and a hardheaded attempt to get basic with each other.

If we women are to get basic, then surely the first job is to find out what liberation for ourselves means, what work it entails, what benefits it will yield.<sup>29</sup>

Addressing Black women, Bambara claims that a new era is beginning. Instead of expending their energy fighting the enemy, she claims Black women have begun to focus their efforts on figuring out "what liberation for [them]selves means." Bambara does not necessarily know what this liberation will look like, but she does position it in opposition to both "whiteness, or racism" and "maleness, or chauvinism," acknowledging the dual

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<sup>28</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Conflict and Chorus: Reconsidering Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*," in *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>29</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, Introduction to *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Signet, 1970), 7.



oppressions that shape Black women's lives. *The Black Woman* reflects the beginning of Black women's sustained engagement with their unique struggles as distinct from those of Black men. This development was not a divergence from Black women's long history of political organizing in the United States, but rather an evolution influenced by the social and political movements of the historical moment. Working alongside white women in the Civil Rights Movement had highlighted for Black women how different their lived experience of gender was from their white colleagues.

Although, as Farah Griffin argues, "*The Black Woman* is not a black feminist text as we have come to understand that term," it documents a diverse, polyphonic body of Black feminist thought.<sup>30</sup> The contents of the anthology reflects Black women's ongoing conversation about their gender and sexual politics, including how it frequently diverged from those advanced by the nascent, white-dominated women's liberation movement. In addition to essays by artists and writers, the anthology contained pieces by Black women activists, including Frances Beale,<sup>31</sup> a longtime Civil Rights activist and member of the Third World Woman's Alliance (TWWA) and members of the Mount Vernon/New Rochelle group (also known as the Pat Robinson Group or the Damned).<sup>32</sup> The Third World Women's Alliance began as the Black Women's Liberation Committee (BWLC). The BWLC was founded as a women's caucus within the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to address Black women's concerns in part in response

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<sup>30</sup> Griffin 118

<sup>31</sup> Beale's essay was also published in the mainstream feminist anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* in 1970, so claims that black women were not writing or thinking about feminism during this time also fail to acknowledge how white feminists were explicitly recognizing and including black feminists as part of the movement early on.

<sup>32</sup> Baxandall 234

to a position paper presented by Frances Beale at a SNCC staff meeting in 1968. Beale's paper addressed the "sterilization abuse and reproductive rights," echoing what would become her foundational essay "Double Jeopardy."<sup>33</sup>

Black women believed their priorities to be markedly different from white women's. In 1964 when a position paper titled "Women in the Movement," drafted by two white women, was circulated among SNCC members, Black women did not agree nor identify with its contents. The authors of "Women in the Movement" criticized what they saw as the unfair and sexist treatment of women in the organization. They claimed they were regularly excluded from decision-making and important projects and instead relegated to traditionally feminine jobs such as secretarial labor. This portrayal of women's roles in SNCC did not reflect the experiences of Black women in the organization, many of whom worked as organizers and some even as leaders of teams.

The memo did not necessarily reflect the experiences of all white women in SNCC or doing Civil Rights work in the South, but its reflection of the disconnect between white and Black women's concerns is instructive for understanding tensions between white and Black women around gendered issues. The mismatch between Black and white women's priorities first became apparent to many during movement organizing and was a cause of tension between the two groups. As activist Jean Wiley reflected, "If white woman had a problem in SNCC it was not just a male/woman problem...it was also a black woman/white woman problem. It was a race problem rather than a woman's

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Ward, "The Third World Women's Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics." *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights—Black Power Era*. ed Peniel E. Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), 125-126.

problem.”<sup>34</sup> These conflicts exacerbated already existing tensions between the two groups who were frequently positioned as rivals for romantic attention from Black male activists.

When the second wave feminist movement, driven primarily by white women, emerged in the late 1960s, its platform reflected this contrast in Black and white women’s experiences. Washington summarized this divergence in priorities:

Certain differences result from the way in which black women grew up. We have been raised to function independently. The notion of *retiring* to housewifery some day is not even a reasonable fantasy. Therefore whether you want to or not, it is necessary to learn to do all the things required to survive. It seemed to many of us, on the other hand, that white women were demanding a chance to be independent while we needed help and assistance, which was not always forthcoming. We definitely started from opposite ends of the spectrum.<sup>35</sup>

Black women viewed white women’s concerns as antithetical or irrelevant to their own. Washington’s assessment echoes Toni Morrison’s 1971 explanation of Black women’s analyses of the discourses of early second wave feminism. She wrote, “black women have found it impossible to respect white women...they regarded them as willful children, pretty children, men children, ugly children, but never as real adults capable of handling the real problems of the world.”<sup>36</sup> Like Washington, Morrison and other Black women believed that white women were not capable of nor were they interested in doing the difficult work necessary for liberation.

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<sup>34</sup> quoted in Sara Margaret Evans, *Personal politics: The roots of women's liberation in the civil rights movement and the new left* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 81

<sup>35</sup> quoted in Evans 239

<sup>36</sup> Toni Morrison, “What the Black Woman Thinks of Women’s Lib,” 1976, *What moves at the margin: Selected nonfiction* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2008): 27.

This disconnect made alliances between Black and white women difficult and discouraged Black women from joining white women's newly formed feminist groups. Instead Black women initially confronted gender issues within Black activist organizations, such as the BWLC formed within SNCC. When the groups split from SNCC, it retained a focus on women of color's concerns. By 1970, the TWWA's mission and shifted and so had its name. "[The members] decided to expand the group...to an autonomous black women's organization that would include 'women from other organizations, welfare mothers, community workers, and campus radicals.'<sup>37</sup> Once independent from SNCC, the BWLC changed its name to the Black Women's Alliance (BWA). Stephen Ward notes that at its inception, "the BWA did not yet have a fully developed, cohesive ideology, but it was developing a decidedly anticapitalist and anti-imperialist framework."<sup>38</sup> Ward argues that because of these commitments, the BWA's politics, like other Black feminists' during this period, had much in common with other "black Left thinkers and activists," including the Black Power movement.<sup>39</sup> The group's final name change to the Third World Women's Alliance (TWWA) marked its expansion to include all third world women in the summer of 1970.<sup>40</sup>

Although Ward, Kimberley Springer, and Benita Roth have all written about the TWWA, its place in black feminist genealogy and second wave feminism is generally overlooked in scholarship. Rosalyn Baxandall has argued that Black women's feminist activism during the 1960s has been illegible to many historians because it often occurred

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<sup>37</sup> Ward 131

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

<sup>40</sup> Ward 134

at the local level, within neighborhoods and focused on issues related to motherhood and child-rearing in addition to wage equality. Baxandall suggests that these groups, in particular the MAW and the Mount Vernon/ New Rochelle group are an important thread of Black feminist organizing that like the TWWA reveal Black feminism's longstanding anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist commitments.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to revealing Black women's involvement in second wave feminism, recent scholarship on the TWWA and other similar organizations along with literary criticism of the same period has revealed that early Black feminists were in dialogue with rather than always in complete opposition to Black Nationalist aesthetics and politics. In his work on the TWWA, Ward "challenge[s] the notion that Black feminism and Black Power were ideologically incompatible or locked in an inherently antagonistic relationship."<sup>42</sup> Instead he argues that Beal and "[t]he members of the TWWA were simultaneously feminist activists and Black Power activists."<sup>43</sup> Similarly Becky Thompson claims Black feminism emerged in parallel with other radical feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s both in response to and in conversation with Black Power, the CRM, and other New Left movements.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Kimberley Springer, "Black Feminists Respond to Black Power Masculinism." *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. Edited by Peniel E. Joseph. 105-118 (New York: Routledge, 2006); Benita Roth, *Separate roads to feminism: Black, Chicana, and White feminist movements in America's second wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Baxandall.

<sup>42</sup> Ward 120

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*

<sup>44</sup> Becky Thompson, "Multiracial feminism: Recasting the chronology of second wave feminism." *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 346.

Kimberley Springer, Amanda Davis, Cherise A. Pollard, and Cheryl Clarke's scholarship on Black women novelists and poets make similar claims about Black women's relationship to Black Nationalist ideology in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>45</sup> Taken together, their work underscores how Black women worked within Black Nationalist frameworks to "challenge...a strictly masculine picture of black revolutionary struggle."<sup>46</sup> Springer and Davis argue that work by Black women writers including Ntozake Shange, Michele Wallace, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker actively intervened in and contested the valorization of Black masculinity within Black Power discourse. Both Springer and Davis argue that Black women writers critiqued Black Power's masculinist ideology by illustrating how it potentially harmed Black women and, in doing so, stymied a movement to liberate and unite all Black people. Davis focuses on how Black women novelists used their work to illustrate the pernicious effects of physical violence on intimate and political relationships between Black men and women. Springer points to Bambara's anthology, Shange's choreopoem, and Wallace's critical essays as attempts to center Black women's voices during "the Black Power era that sought to relegate women to the periphery of struggle and into a private sphere that black women, always workers, were never fully embedded in."<sup>47</sup> Similarly Pollard and Clarke's studies of Black women poets in the Black Arts Movement reveal how poets like Shange, Audre

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<sup>45</sup> Kimberley Springer (2006); Amanda Davis, "To Build a Nation: Black Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Violent Reduction of Wholeness." *Frontier: A Journal of Women's Studies* 26.3 (2005): 24-53; Cherise A. Pollard, "Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women's Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement" in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Lisa Gail Collins and Margot Natalie Crawford. 173-187 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Cheryl Clarke, "*After Mecca*": *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Springer 2006 108

<sup>47</sup> *ibid* 118

Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni used and transformed Black Arts Movement tropes and messages to express their own, alternative ideas about relationships between the sexes.

Because Walker was both a Civil Rights Movement activist and active in second wave feminist cultural institutions, it is not surprising that her career and her early work reflect this tension between Black and white women as well as Black women's subsequent rejection and transformation of second wave feminist ideologies. By examining writing from the first decade of Walker's career alongside her contemporaneous activist and academic work, I argue that we can discern a rich and complex literary counterpart to the political work that early Black feminist groups like the TWWA did through their engagement with the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Women's Liberation Movements.

### *Walker's Work and Life*

Walker was born on February 9, 1944 to Minnie Lou and Willie Lee Walkers in Putnam County, Georgia. Her parents were sharecroppers and her experiences growing up in the rural South shaped her sensibilities and aesthetics for the rest of her life. After graduating as the valedictorian from high school in 1961, Walker matriculated to Spelman College in Atlanta. Walker chafed against Spelman's conservative racialized gender politics. She rebelled against expectations of respectable Black womanhood, instead taking courses with radical leftist historian Howard Zinn and becoming involved

in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1963 she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. At Sarah Lawrence, Walker flourished as a writer under the tutelage of white women professors including the poets Muriel Rukeyser and Jane Cooper as well as the philosopher Helen Lynd. In 1965 after returning from Uganda and Kenya where she had traveled through the Experiment in International Living, Walker discovered she was pregnant. She obtained an abortion that fall with the help of friends. The pregnancy and subsequent abortion deeply impacted Walker, sending her into a depression. It is during this period that she wrote many of the poems that would later be published in her collection *Once*. She infamously slipped these poems under Rukeyser's office door, which led the poet to mentor Walker and eventually lead to her getting a publishing contract. After graduating from Sarah Lawrence in 1966, Walker moved to Jackson, Mississippi to intern at the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. While there she continued her civil rights activism by taking depositions from Black residents who had been evicted for registering to vote. It was during her time at the Legal Defense and Education Fund that she met her future husband Melvin Leventhal, a white Jewish law student. The two married in 1967. After Leventhal completed law school, they returned to Jackson to continue their civil rights work.

Walker's first poetry collection *Once* was published shortly afterwards in 1968. During this period, Walker continued working on *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, her first novel, which she had begun while living in New York with Leventhal as he finished his law degree. The novel was published in 1970 shortly after the birth of their daughter Rebecca. Walker published her first short story collection *In Love & Trouble*:



*Stories of Black Women* in 1973. That same year her second poetry collection *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* was also published. In 1974 she accepted a position as editor at *Ms. Magazine*, moved back to New York, and began her longtime friendship with Gloria Steinem. She would work at *Ms.* as an editor and contributor until 1986. In 1976, Walker published her second novel *Meridian*, that same year she and Leventhal divorced amicably. Walker's most well-known novel, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, *The Color Purple* was published in 1982. Her writing career continued to flourish and she has since published numerous other collections of poetry, short stories, essays, and several more novels.<sup>48</sup>

Walker's early work—*Once, Grange, and Meridian*—is situated solidly in the South and rooted in an appreciation of Southern aesthetics and Black folk culture. Much of it is historical addressing the generational effects of racism, sexism, and poverty on Black families and individuals in the South and is often deeply personal and autobiographical. Her later work is still deeply invested in issues of racism and sexism but has a global scope and is less personal. I focus on Walker's early career writing because it shares the concerns of her most popular, feminist text *The Color Purple* and because the often deeply autobiographical content reveals Walker's own experiences and beliefs as well as reflects the early Black feminist ideas that would not be explicitly articulated at length until her foundational 1983 essay collection *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.

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<sup>48</sup> See White's excellent biography.

Walker's work explores the pernicious effects of racism and sexism on Black people's lives and the intergenerational trauma that is caused by these compounding oppressions. Both *Grange* and *The Color Purple* depict the struggles of Black Southerners during the Depression era while critiquing both inter- and intra-racial power structures and relationships. As a story of generational growth and inherited anguish, *Grange* reveals through the evolution of its eponymous protagonist the dangers of patriarchy and violence to both individuals and the Black community as a whole. Like Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which was published the same year, Walker takes a critical look at gender and familial trauma within the Black community to critique the gender politics proposed by Black Nationalism and to reveal the internal struggles of Black women. Her short stories, particularly those in *In Love & Trouble*, explore these same themes. At the same time, Walker's early works are a meditation on and in dialogue with the Civil Rights and long Black Freedom Movements.<sup>49</sup>

The majority of the poems in Walker's first collection were written during her time at Sarah Lawrence, most during period of furious productivity during the fall of 1966, although they were not published until 1968. Dedicated to her college mentor Howard Zinn. The collection was a success with advance sales totaling over 1,000 copies, which both her agent Monica McCall and her editor Hiram Haydn took pains to tell Walker was exceptional for a book of poetry, especially a first book.<sup>50</sup> Given that it was

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<sup>49</sup> See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's essay "The long civil rights movement and the political uses of the past." *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1233-1263 for a discussion of the concept of the "long" CRM.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Lillian Brahm, August 23, 1968. Letter from Monica McCall October 14, 1968. Letter from Hiram Haydn, September 27, 1968.

her first published collection it is surprising that it is not studied more by Walker scholars. Nonetheless when read alongside her other writing, *Once* reveals Walker's view of the Movement and builds upon the themes evident throughout her work. Specifically the poems in *Once* explore Walker's travel to Africa, her experiences in the Movement, her childhood and upbringing in the South, as well as some poems dealing with difference, love, and death in both personal and more abstract ways.<sup>51</sup> Her publisher's blurb described the poems dealing with the Movement as, "angry and vivid poems that give the readers an urgent sense of being on the scene, of seeing the faces and hearing the voices of those involved."<sup>52</sup> The Movement poems in *Once* describe the furor of protests as well as the relationships between activists, including friendships and romances.

The title poem is in Walker's characteristic minimalist style and consists of fourteen sections, each a vignette of an experience or scene related to her time in the Movement. These images range from candid conversations about Black defiance to mournful depictions and memories of racist violence. The first section sets the tone for these juxtapositions between resistance and tragedy. It is worth quoting in its entirety:

Green lawn  
a picket fence

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<sup>51</sup> In a 1973 interview with John O'Brien, Walker categorizes the poems in *Once* as "African ones," "suicide poems," "love poems," and "poems of the struggle in the South." See John O'Brien, "Interview with Alice Walker (1973)." *The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker*. ed. Rudolph P. Byrd, 35-57. New York: The New Press, 2010. First published in *Interviews with Black Writers* (New York: Liveright, 1973).

<sup>52</sup> (Corrected BLURB, Approx. 55 characters to a line) circa Feb. 1968

flowers—  
My friend smiles  
she had heard  
that Southern  
jails were drab.

Looking up I see  
a strong arm  
raised  
the Law  
Someone in America  
is being  
protected  
(from me.)

In the morning  
there was  
a man in grey  
but the sky  
was blue.

By contrasting the bucolic scenery surrounding a Southern jail with the legal repression it enacts, the speaker highlights the injustice and absurdity of her experience. The green lawn and blue sky are jarring against the presence of the prison and the prison guard dressed in grey. This ironic juxtaposition reflects the contradictions of the larger world.

The law exists to protect (white) others from the speaker, not the speaker herself. This opening section resists a depiction of the Movement as wholly triumphant; violence and the natural beauty of the South co-exist.

The poem contains several sections on outrageous Black men speaking back against white supremacy. One “Arrogant friend” responds to the exclamation, ““Look at that/ nigger with those/ white folks!”” with a defiant, incredulous “Where?” Another, “who told/ the judge/ re: indecent exposure,”

just because  
my skin  
is black  
don’t mean  
it ain’t  
pretty

A third

...tried  
to crash  
All barriers  
at once,  
          wanted to  
swim  
At a white

beach (in Alabama)

Nude.

The speaker calls these men “the daring/ones” and admits, “I’ve always loved [them]” In “Once,” the Black man is not a triumphant charismatic leader but rather a risk taker, who is indignant in the face of white supremacy, who seeks bodily freedom, and transgresses segregation’s boundaries.

The poem describes the interracial nature of the Movement in the early sixties. Section six describes Peter, “...a yid/ seventeen,” who was murdered as a result of his involvement in civil rights protests. The female “friend” that the speaker describes in sections one and four is a white woman. The third section of a poem narrates a letter this friend receives while “Working around/ the Negro section”:

--the letter

said

“I hope you’re

having a good time

fucking all

the niggers”

The letter is revealed to be from the friend’s mother. The hateful letter, effectively disowning her, produces a sadness in the friend, but does not dissuade her from continuing to work with the Black community:

That day she sat  
a long time  
a little black girl  
in pigtails  
in her lap.

Her eyes were very  
Quiet.

She used to tell the big colored ladies  
her light eyes just  
the same  
“I am alone  
my mother died.”  
Though no other  
letter  
came.

The young white woman is isolated from and rejected by her family because of her work in the Movement. As a result, her only source of intimacy and connection is with the Black community she works with, the “little black girl” and “the big colored ladies.” Her declaration of her mother’s “death” marks how her commitment to racial justice has alienated her from her family and other white people. Walker describes a similar familial break for a white woman activist in *Meridian*. This section illustrates the possibility of

friendship between white and Black women simply by its use of “friend,” but also expresses a genuine and profound feeling of empathy and pity for how participating in the Movement affected white activists’ lives.

Other sections in “Once” read as both a celebration of and an elegy for Black little girls’ and their innocence. The seventh section describes a Black girl stealing an ice cream cone from little white boy because she was “hungry.” The speaker tells a police officer, “I *don’t* think/ integration/ entered/ into it,” marking the shared human desires and desperation of poverty that undergird interracial conflict. In the thirteenth section the speaker recollects,

a little girl,  
dreaming—perhaps,  
hit by  
a  
van truck

The driver dismisses her death exclaiming, “That nigger was/ in the way!” But the speaker rejects his excuse,

But was she?  
She was  
just eight  
her mother



said  
and little  
for  
her age.

She mourns the little girl's death and highlights the injustice of her quotidian murder by highlighting her innocence. The poem's final fourteenth section in describes a "picture of" a

bleak-eyed  
little black  
girl  
waving the  
american  
flag  
holding it  
gingerly  
with  
the very  
*tips*  
of her  
fingers.

The poem concludes as it began with a juxtaposition of beauty and racial injustice. The picture of the little girl echoes many of the images of Black children SNCC produced and

circulated as part of its public relations campaign.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, her tender grasp on the American flag symbolically illustrates the historically precarious and incomplete nature of Black citizenship that the Movement sought to rectify.

The other poems in *Once* that address the Movement describe the experience of protesting (“Chic Freedom’s Reflection”), Walker’s love of the South (“South: The Name of Home”), music in the Movement and her life (“Hymn”), and meditations on the struggle (e.g. “They Who Feel Death” and “The Enemy”). These poems are alternately mournful and joyful in tone. The contradictory emotions in the work accurately represent Walker’s experience of the Movement. She says, “The anger and humiliation I had suffered was always in conflict with the elation, the exaltation, the *joy* I felt when I could leave each vicious encounter or confrontation whole and not—like the people before me—spewing obscenities or throwing bricks. For, during those encounters, I had begun to comprehend what it meant to be lost.”<sup>54</sup> The contrast between the fear and the violence of the struggle and the joyful knowledge that she was not one of the hateful racists against whom the protesters struggled is evident in the range of feelings in the poems about the Movement.

Walker’s acknowledgement of both the pain and the joy within the Civil Rights Movement as well as her writing elsewhere about how the struggle is not triumphant and has not been finished push us to rethink the dominant depiction of the Movement. In

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<sup>53</sup> For more on the role of photography in the Civil Rights Movement and SNCC’s strategic deployment of it see Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Durham, NC: UNC Press Books, 2011.)

<sup>54</sup> O’Brien 38

response to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's 2005 call for a more expansive, "long" historiographical paradigm of the Civil Rights Movement, Christopher Metress has suggested that in addition to widening the timeframe of the Movement we also widen our understanding of what counts as a Movement text. Metress seeks "to make the case for a more expansive sense of the materials of civil rights history, staking a claim for how literary representations of the movement are a valuable and untapped legacy for enriching our understanding of the Black freedom struggle in the mid-twentieth century."<sup>55</sup> Like shifting the historiographical periodization of the Black freedom movement, adjusting what artifacts we use to analyze it also shapes how we understand the Movement. In his essay, Metress analyzes two different texts' depiction of Birmingham Summer, 1963: Martin Luther King's memoir *Why We Can't Wait* (1964) and Anthony Grooms's novel *Bombingham* (2001). Metress argues that in his memoir King "[refuses] to see 1963 as concluding in a bleakness of spirit that militated against America's noble journey" and instead re-casts the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church as a metaphor for the "creative explosion that...helps to ignite the revolution that moves the nation toward the fulfillment of its sacred birthright."<sup>56</sup> Doing so enables him to maintain his belief in and message of "the resilience of democratic liberalism."<sup>57</sup> In contrast, Metress claims, "Grooms' novel operates as an 'alternative civil rights narrative'" which narrates the Movement as unfulfilled, full of suffering, and unsuccessful.<sup>58</sup> Though they depict the

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<sup>55</sup> Christopher Metress, "Making Civil Rights Harder: Literature, Memory, and the Black Freedom Struggle," *The Southern Literary Journal* 40.2 (2008): 141.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid 143

<sup>57</sup> Ibid 140

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

same events each text renders their meaning differently, putting forth alternative images of the Movement itself.

I read Walker's representation of the Movement in this way, as an interpretation of the Movement that contrasts with the prevailing hegemonic one. The poetry in *Once* provides a complex personal view of the Movement that rejects the prevailing triumphalist narrative, instead depicting both the extreme joy and the fear that characterized the struggle. Elsewhere Walker has written explicitly about her thoughts on Movement itself and its afterlives. In 1967, Walker's first published essay, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Was it Good for?", was published after she won the *American Scholar's* annual competition. The essay refutes claims that the Movement is over. Walker argues that "liberal whites" and other uninvested parties claim the Movement is over and/or has failed in order to be rid of it. Walker argues that the Movement will never be over. She writes, "As long as one black American survives, the struggle for equality with other Americans must survive. This is a debt we owe to those blameless hostages we leave to the future, our children."<sup>59</sup> While Walker concedes that the Movement did not successfully secure increased wages or economic security for the majority of Black people, she argues that its success was in awakening souls to the possibility of another way of life, the promise of liberation, which created new connections between people.<sup>60</sup> This knowledge, she writes, "called [her] to life," and led her to "[fight] for [her] life and

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<sup>59</sup> Alice Walker, "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Routledge, 1983): 140.

<sup>60</sup> She writes, "If knowledge of my condition is all the freedom I got from a 'freedom movement,' it is better than unawareness, forgottenness, and hopelessness, the existence that is like the existence of a beast." (121)

for a chance to be [her]self, to be something more than a shadow or a number, than [she] had ever done before in [her] life.”<sup>61</sup> It was the same for other individuals and for the nation as a whole: “if it gave us nothing else; it gave us each other forever.”<sup>62</sup> According to Walker, the affective transformation occasioned by the Movement were profound and lasted beyond what some claimed was the Movement’s “end.” Her poetry as well as her fiction on the Movement probe this affective dimension especially as it relates to interracialism, the so-called “black and whites together” of SNCC.

Thus it is hardly surprising that alongside the Movement poems in *Once* there are quite a few love poems in the collection, some of which describe interracial love affairs. These explorations of interracial intimacy reflect the “black and white together” ethos of SNCC and other Movement organizations in the early sixties. Walker’s poems addressing interracial affairs, then, must be read in this historical context as meditations on the challenges of such unions. Like her Movement poems, the ambivalent tone of some of the interracial love poems attempt to trouble easy depictions of interracial cooperation and togetherness during the Civil Rights struggle. I will focus on the poems “Johann,” “The Kiss,” and “Mornings: Of an Impossible Love Affair.” In these poems, the speaker acknowledges love affairs with white men, describing their blonde hair and blue eyes. In “The Kiss,” the speaker narrates an encounter with a “czech” man in “bratislava” who “kissed me for/ not anyhow *looking*/ like aunt jemima.” The tone here is ambivalent seemingly referencing both a simple fetishization and stereotyping of Blackness as well as a rejection of it, while simultaneously leaving open the possibility that the speaker

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid* 122; 125.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid* 128

while not “*looking/* like aunt jemima” might in fact be like the tokenized Southern mammy in some way.

“Mornings” is unlike the other poems in the collection in that it is a prose poem and that the title and each of the five stanzas sit alone, each on separate pages. The poem describes the waning of a love affair that is “impossible” because the man is white. It is full of the speaker’s insecurity and self-doubt. She anticipates her lover leaving her and questions if he “disapproved of the little dark shadow standing behind [him] with its arms around [his] waist...”

While in “Mornings,” the interracial love affair is troubled by a white rejection of the speaker’s Blackness, in “Johann” the speaker is questioning the possibility of love with a white man. Walker has called “Johann,” “the most extreme example of [her] need to love even the most unfamiliar, the most fearful.”<sup>63</sup> The poem is a thought exercise in response to Walker’s experiences in Germany and her fear of whiteness. According to her, “when I traveled in Germany I was in a constant state of terror, and no amount of flattery from handsome young German men could shake it.”<sup>64</sup> The speaker in the poem addresses her white male lover, Johann, reacting to his desire for her and her own fear. The opening stanzas describes their possible offspring:

You look at me with children  
In your eyes

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<sup>63</sup> O’Brien 38

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*

Blond, blue-eyed  
Teutons  
Charmingly veiled  
In bronze  
Got from me

What would Hitler say?

The mingling of “blue eye[s]” and “bronze” skin of the couple’s hypothetical children is followed immediately by the invocation of Hitler, evoking racist violence, white supremacy, and the oppressive forces that would never authorize the interracial union that would produce these fictive children. In the third stanza, the speaker describes herself as “brown-er/ Than a jew” and contrasts her racial alterity with his whiteness. The lover’s appearance makes him “the Golden Boy,/ Shiny but bloody/ And with that martial tune/ Only your heart is out of step—” For the speaker, his race and “Teuton[ic]” heritage link him indelibly with the racist history of the Third Reich, even if his “heart is out of step.”

The speaker explains her reluctance in the fourth stanza:

But even knowing love  
I shrink from you. Blond  
And Black; it is too charged a combination  
Charged with past and present wars,  
Charged with frenzy

and with blood

His body represents a mass of racist horrors and, as such, their union is haunted by the past and made more dangerous by it. In the fifth stanza the speaker contemplates the risks of their relationship, asking, “Dare I kiss your German mouth?”

The speaker’s attitude shifts across stanzas six through ten, all two line couplets. The sixth and seventh stanzas describe revulsion at the physical characteristics described in the preceding ones: “I shudder at the whiteness/ Of your hands”; “Blue is too cold a color/ For eyes.” The next two stanzas feature a sudden reversal: “But white, I think, is the color/ Of honest flowers,”; “And blue is the color/Of the sky.” The terrifying associations with the lover’s phenotype are replaced with positive associations with nature’s beauty. In the eleventh stanza, she invites her lover closer: “I will kiss your German mouth”; “I will rock the yellow head against/ My breast, brown and yielding.” The twelfth and thirteenth stanzas disrupt the warm resolution of the previous two. The speaker reminds her lover: “There is still so much to fear.”

The final two stanzas dismiss the danger the future may bring and resituate the speaker and her lover in the present:

I will not reject you  
I will kiss your fearful  
German mouth.  
And you—



Look at me boldly  
With surging, brown-blond teutons  
In your eyes.

Ultimately the speaker pushes aside her fear to embrace her lover, at least for now. In “Johann” Walker explores the risks and weighted significance of interracial affairs and valorizes sensuality and human connection. She refuses to dismiss the real, material dangers of such relationships but holds space for the possibility that they can bring joy despite or along with the fear they inspire. Against the backdrop of “black and white together,” Walker’s representation of interracial relationships as nonetheless still haunted by history tempers utopic depictions of interracial cooperation while also acknowledging the power and potential pleasure of such relationships.

Other poems in the volume are clearly written in response to Walker’s unplanned pregnancy, abortion, and subsequent depression. The final five poems—“ballad of the brown girl,” “Suicide,” “Excuse,” “to die before one wakes must be glad,” and “Exercises on themes from Life”—explicitly describe a desire for death. “ballad of the brown girl” describes the subject’s unsuccessful efforts to procure an abortion and subsequent suicide. Walker describes the writing of *Once* as therapeutic.<sup>65</sup> She was able to work process the depression she experienced during the writing as well as her earlier experiences traveling in Africa and during the Movement. Walker would continue to use her writing to help her explore and make sense of her own experiences and ideas as well as African American history, including the Civil Rights Movement. Her second novel

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<sup>65</sup> See O’Brien.

*Meridian* and her short story “Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells” also take part in this project to re-cast and re-remember the Movement

*Confronting Difference: Gender and Race in Walker’s Life and Work*

Walker’s opinions of and relationship to the two major social movements of the late 1960s and 70s—Women’s Liberation and Black Power—are apparent both in her fiction and in her personal correspondence. As a Black woman married to a white man, Walker often found herself overlooked by both the mainstream and the Black literary worlds. These perceived slights infuriated her. At the same time, Walker’s foray into predominantly white feminist communities were also marked by conflict.

After the publication of *Once* and her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Walker’s literary career flourished. She published several essays and short stories in magazines and worked on publishing another collection of poetry and one of short stories. Despite her success, Walker was repeatedly frustrated by the literary establishment’s dismissal of her work. This was true for both white and Black critics and publications. In 1970 Hoyt W. Fuller the managing editor of *Black World* apparently wrote Walker in reply to a letter she had sent, insisting that he had not rejected her poems and asking if the magazine could “keep them for a later issue.”<sup>66</sup> In a letter to Julius Lester dated December 4th of that year, Walker describes the origins of the conflict with Hoyt and her general frustrations with publishers: “What I am going to do is already

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<sup>66</sup> Letter from Hoyt Fuller, September 2, 1970

being planned/ I am going to respond to all of this shit, but I'm waiting until I get just the right insult."<sup>67</sup> Walker had already sent a copy of *Grange* to Fuller but, "When I arrived in Chicago on my tour and met him for the first time of course he hadn't read it but instead was the most condescending man I've met in a long time... Anyway, I had sent some poems to them which, with a terse note, Black world rejected... Then the Chicago papers reviewed me and the book extensively so I got another letter from Hoyt saying that 'of course we didn't' reject your poems!'"<sup>68</sup>

This incident appears to be what Walker referenced in a 1973 interview when describing a review published in a "leading black monthly" that she says, "admitted (the editor did) that the book itself was never read; but the magazine ran an item stating that a *white* reviewer had praised the book (which was, in itself, an indication that the book was no good—such went the logic) and then hinted that the reviewer had liked my book because of my lifestyle."<sup>69</sup> By "lifestyle," Walker means her interracial marriage. Indeed her marriage to a white man along with her gender may have been additional reasons for what she perceived as rejection by the Black mainstream.

In the 1970 letter, Walker reassured Lester that whatever rejection he has received from Hoyt was likely the result of jealousy. She described feeling "a general frostiness" around "people like Hoyt and Don Lee," likening it to "the same kind of nervousness I used to feel when I went into a white country store."<sup>70</sup> Given that Don L. Lee, who would later change his name to Haki Madhubuti, was closely allied with the Black Arts

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<sup>67</sup> Letter to Julius Lester, December 4, 1970

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*

<sup>69</sup> O'Brien 49-51.

<sup>70</sup> Letter to Julius Lester, December 4, 1970.

Movement, Walker's dislike for him and his perceived mistreatment of her may be attributed to misogyny. Although Hoyt's dismissal of her work seemed also to be about his disdain for lower class Black people.

Walker wrote to Lester of her disdain for the "arrogance" of a certain group of Black people, those whose "eyes...have frosted over with ice." She connected this attitude to Black Nationalism and patriarchy writing, "As for 'our' women, I just can't understand where their pride is. Nor can I comprehend why they want to be so much like the white people they hate. For actually the danger is not so much that you look white or all that other stuff, but that you act white, since actions, not looks, leave marks." Walker seemed to believe Lee, Hoyt, and their ilk are hypocrites and race traitors. She contrasted them to her own "belief in the values of the south," by which she meant her pride in her family, ancestry, and upbringing, her respect for the Black folkways of the South that Hoyt dismissed.<sup>71</sup>

Walker also wrote, "in Africa I felt more american [sic] than ever." She believed Hoyt "will make a big issue out [of that statement and her pride in her Georgia roots]." Walker rejected an easy connection to the continent and the romanticized idea of a return to African roots that many Black Nationalists promoted.<sup>72</sup> Similarly she described a position taken by LeRoi Jones that "blacks become 'imitation whites' when they marry whites" as "stupid." Walker's beliefs were at odds with the Black Nationalist

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid*

<sup>72</sup> "I think it is arrogant for black americans [sic] to go to africa [sic] and claim they feel completely right there. It is the arrogance of a colonialist." Walker goes on to critique the unequal gender relations she saw during her time in Africa. Instead she calls for "some real confrontation with the real africa."

establishment and she bristled at what she believed to be its mistreatment of her and her work. In essay written in the early seventies, Walker criticized what she saw as the lack of artistic merit in Black Arts Movement literature<sup>73</sup> and the accompanying misogynistic form of Black masculinity that pervaded both BAM and the Black Nationalist movement. Walker was uninterested in Black Nationalism's gender politics or Black Power's call for violent resistance. She viewed the shift to Black Nationalism in the late sixties and early seventies as "[i]n fact, a movement *backward* from the egalitarian goals of the sixties seems a facet of nationalist groups."<sup>74</sup>

Walker expressed her critique of sexism in general and within the Black Power movement in her fiction. The entirety of *Grange*, as discussed above, explored the effects of misogyny and intergenerational trauma on both Black men and women. Several of her short stories written in the late sixties and early seventies also dealt with sexism. Two of her most studied short stories, "The Child Who Favored Daughter" and "Roselily,"<sup>75</sup> both engage with these themes. "The Child Who Favored Daughter" describes a father murdering his daughter and cutting off her breasts in a fit of rage and sexual jealousy after he learns she is having an affair with a white man. As in *Grange*, sexuality and violence are linked and a man's desire to control a woman in his life leads him to murder

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<sup>73</sup> See Alice Walker, "Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Routledge, 1983): 137. Walker writes of BAM literature, "It is boring because is easy and requires only the reader be a lazy reader and a prejudiced one. Each story or poem has a formula, usually two-thirds 'hate whitey's guts' and one-third 'I am black, beautiful, strong, and always right.' Art is not flattery, necessarily, and the work of any artist must be more difficult than that."

<sup>74</sup> Alice Walker, "Choosing to Stay at Home," *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Routledge, 1983): 169.

<sup>75</sup> Both appeared in Walker's 1973 collection of short stories *In Love & Trouble*. "Roselily" was first published in 1972 in *Ms*.

her. In “Roselily,” the protagonist contemplates how her life will change as she marries her new, Muslim husband who will take her and her children North with him to Chicago. She questions her choice to trade her freedom for economic security and respectability. Marrying her new husband means entering, “A lifetime of black and white. Of veils. Covered head.”<sup>76</sup> She will no longer work. Instead, “Her place will be in the home...what will she do? They will make babies...They will be inevitable. Her hands will be full. Full of what? Babies. She is not comforted.”<sup>77</sup> She finds herself longing for the freedom of her previous life, a freedom she realizes she may not have ever truly known. These two stories along with much of Walker’s other work reveal the danger of misogyny both in the Black community and in general and critique any philosophy that would seek to control or lessen women.

In addition to critiques of BAM and Black Nationalism, Walker was, at that same time, involved in a complicated relationship with white women and the women’s liberation movement. In 1970, years before she began working at *Ms.*, Walker began a long correspondence with Pam Allen, the wife of Robert Allen, the editor of *The Black Scholar*, who she first met as a college student and for whom she still had strong feelings. Walker and Robert Allen would later have a years long affair in the late 1970s after her divorce from Leventhal. These letters between Pam Allen and Walker reveal both Allen’s fears about the connection between Walker and her husband as well as the tensions and growing friendship between the two women, including discussion of how their racial

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<sup>76</sup> Alice Walker, “Roselily,” *In Love & Trouble* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973): 8.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid 7

difference (Allen was white) affected their relationship as women. The two women discussed the women's liberation movement and shared with each other their experiences of life, racism, sexism, marriage, and later motherhood. A reading of the letters between Walker and Allen reveal how Walker understood her relationship to the women's liberation movement and (white dominated) feminism in the early seventies, prior to and during the writing of her own feminist treatise "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens."

In their early letters, Allen wrote that she very much wanted to be friends with Walker, desiring as she does Black woman friends in the absence of them in California's almost completely white women's circle in which she traveled.<sup>78</sup> Allen worried about whether "white women will ever overcome their white supremacy."<sup>79</sup> She detailed her coming to consciousness both about her own upbringing and the women's movement's failures to be racially inclusive:

I had hoped more than anything to find that community among women for I believed that through our womaness [sic] we of many races and indeed cultures could transcend the divisions of this man made world and show a way towards liberation for all of us – men, women, and children. But that is not happening and I no longer believe it can where white women are defining the movement for of course they are defining liberation in their own terms – and those terms are equality with white men regardless of what they say to the contrary.<sup>80</sup>

Allen's observations echo those of other women, both Black and white, at the time about the difficulty of interracial coalition building among feminist women.

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<sup>78</sup> This in itself is somewhat odd as there were women of color feminists in San Francisco and Oakland in the early 1970s, as I discuss in chapter two.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Pam Allen, September 1, 1971

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

Allen also thanked Walker for her work. *Grange* in particular seemed to have helped her better understand the difference between Black and white women's experiences. She wrote:

The things you have said in your book, in letters to me and while here, are discouraging regarding my hope that black women will help build a true feminism. But I have had to face the fact that what I want is not as important as understanding realistically what is...I am not surprised that black women will not accept feminism as white women define it. I am sorry that they all too often reject feminism in totality rather than just its white manifestation.<sup>81</sup>

Walker responded positively to Allen's letters, which often also referenced her relationship with Allen's husband Robert and the romantic triangle between the three of them. In reply to Allen's observations about white and Black women and her own work on white supremacy within the women's movement, Walker encourages Pam to continue reckoning "with the evil of the white supremacy still rampant among white women."<sup>82</sup>

In 1973 the same year that she first presented "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" as a talk at Radcliffe, Walker responded to a letter in which Allen discussed the evolution of her own politics and her continuing concerns about the inclusiveness of the women's movement:

I realized reading the first half of your letter that political labels truly do not mean anything to me. They can be sign-post, but not road. Which is why my first and only involvement with a structured women's group ended in escape from it. Because I recognized that I could not sit and listen to another woman's tale about

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<sup>81</sup> Letter from Pam Allen to Walker, Labor Day, 1971.

<sup>82</sup> Letter to Pam Allen, September 12-24, 1971.



her plantation. But this did not mean that I was not for women's liberation. It simply meant that I must search elsewhere for a freedom to be shared by all.<sup>83</sup>

Here Walker argues that the mainstream women's movement and its commitment to conscious-raising groups cannot lead to "a freedom to be shared by all." Walker's vision of feminist liberation would be described in greater detail in "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." Her deep respect for the past and her roots, her love of Black Southern people, formed the core of her feminist/womanist philosophy, which differed greatly from ideas that Allen and many other feminists held. Walker believed that Black folklife and the intergenerational lessons within families, shared from woman to woman, mother to daughter, could be the source of political and spiritual liberation.

When Walker accepted a position as editor at *Ms.* magazine and returned to New York in 1974 she began working regularly with white women, including Gloria Steinem, a co-founder of the magazine with whom she developed a close friendship. Later, Walker would go on to corresponded regularly with Steinem and shared drafts of her writing, including early manuscripts of *Meridian*. Walker treated her position as editor as a part-time job. She worked only two days a week preferring to focus on her own writing, especially finishing her novel. Walker had been reticent about accepting the position at *Ms.* as she explained in a letter to Pam:

I would like very much to have a long talk with Bob and learn whether he thinks it is total folly for me to align myself with *Ms.* magazine, which is 95% white. I feel the ludicrousness, sometimes, of my being there, when there is so much I

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<sup>83</sup> Letter to Pam Allen, June 2, 1973.

want to be saying and doing with black women (and men) but I have tried, and they are really not that interested.<sup>84</sup>

Again, Walker notes that she felt ignored by the Black publishing world. Although *Essence*, a magazine targeted at Black women, was founded around the same time as *Ms.* Walker had a “strained relationship with the magazine.”<sup>85</sup> She said of her experiences with *Essence*, “Unlike at *Ms.*, I never got the sense that my voice was really valued or understood at *Essence*, even when they published my work.”<sup>86</sup> Even though Walker sometimes clashed with the staff at *Ms.* she was successful in her mission of getting them to publish more work by third world women,<sup>87</sup> including African women novelists Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Bessie Head. She was also instrumental in securing the rights to publish an excerpt from Ntozake Shange’s first novel, *Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo*.<sup>88</sup>

During the period between signing the contract for her second novel, when she also published *Revolutionary Petunias* (1973) and *In Love & Trouble* (1973), Walker began more serious thinking and engaging in conversations about feminism, Black women’s relationship to feminism, and relationships between Black and white women, as well as relationships between Black men and women. All of these concerns are explored in *Meridian*, which was finally published in 1976.

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<sup>84</sup> Letter to Pam Allen, November 14, 1974.

<sup>85</sup> White 268

<sup>86</sup> quoted in White 268-9.

<sup>87</sup> In a 1975 letter to Allen, Walker wrote, “In a way, I’ve seen my function [at *Ms.*] from the first as finding and publishing good third world women writers, and so far I’ve been quite successful.”

<sup>88</sup> White 268

*Meridian as Re-Memory of the Movement(s)*

*Meridian* is a non-traditional novel. It is a collection of powerful and searing scenes, non-linear in structure similar in style to Jean Toomer's *Cane*. The novel tells the story of its protagonist, Meridian Hill, tracing her childhood through her maturation, focusing on her participation in the Civil Rights Movement and how her involvement in the ongoing Black liberation struggle shapes her life. She was inspired by the life and work of activist Ruby Doris Robinson (nee Smith), who had been integral to SNCC's operation and passed away from terminal cancer in 1967, at the age of twenty-five.<sup>89</sup> Like Robinson, who Walker said, "gave all her energy to SNCC and was really treated shabbily," Meridian struggles to find acceptance within the Movement and is the victim of Black patriarchy. Meridian also suffers from mysterious illnesses often fainting after participating in a protest. Like Robinson the struggle took a physical toll on her. Walker uses Meridian's experiences to disrupt the "misplaced nostalgia and romanticism" for the Movement and explore themes of Black women's experiences with gender, sexuality, and patriarchy.<sup>90</sup> The novel disrupts public memory of the Movement by insisting we acknowledge Movement activists' "flaws." Walker's depiction of Meridian and her compatriots as complex and deeply flawed individuals counters, "The image you got on television [which] showed their remarkable control, their sense of wholeness and

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<sup>89</sup> White 286-287

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in White 291

beauty.”<sup>91</sup> In *Meridian*, Walker endeavors to reveal, “the other side of that control...the cost of their heroism, which [she] think[s] as black people, as Americans, we don’t tend to want to look at because the cost is so painful.”<sup>92</sup>

Deborah McDowell has argued that the novel is a *bildungsroman* and chronicles Meridian’s journey from childhood to womanhood, to maturity and full self-possession.<sup>93</sup> McDowell traces Meridian’s evolution through her rejection of traditional gender roles and the racist status quo of her world. McDowell locates these roles in the signs advertising the sideshow mummy who appears in the novel’s opening scene. The preserved, punished white women, whose husband displays her corpse for profit, is described as an “Obedient Daughter,” “Devoted Wife” and “Adoring Mother.”<sup>94</sup> McDowell observes that these are “the traditional stages of a woman’s life” and that over the course of the novel, Meridian rejects each of them.<sup>95</sup> She writes, “Like the mummy woman, Meridian is, at various stages in the novel, a daughter, though not obedient; a wife, though not devoted; and a mother, though not adoring, for the demands of those roles are circumscriptive and stifling.”<sup>96</sup> Meridian’s journey culminates in the creation of her own worldview and “identity fashioned not from the Western tradition, but rather

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<sup>91</sup> Claudia Tate, “Interview with Alice Walker,” *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983): 179.

<sup>92</sup> *ibid*

<sup>93</sup> Deborah McDowell, “The Self in Bloom: Alice Walker’s *Meridian*,” *CLA Journal* 24.3 (1981): 263-275.

<sup>94</sup> *Meridian* 4

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid* 265

<sup>96</sup> *ibid* 266

from the artifacts of her own heritage.”<sup>97</sup> After rejecting others’ ideas of who she should be or how she should behave, Meridian is able to live happily and do her work.

Other scholars have commented on the depiction of the Movement in the novel.

Roberta M. Hendrickson has argued that the novel is a meditation on it.<sup>98</sup> She writes, “Though the Civil Rights Movement was declared dead, *Meridian* is a novel that affirms the Movement’s vision of freedom and nonviolence, affirms blackness and African American heritage in a racist society that failed to value and continued to destroy Black lives, and focuses on Black women and their participation in the Movement, refusing to make them less than they had been.”<sup>99</sup> Similarly Thadious Davis articulates *Meridian*’s relationship to the Movement this way:

*Meridian* provides a personal narrative for the collective rights revolution and for what is at stake in thinking about both mid-twentieth-century transformation in the interpretation of laws affecting rights and the regression in the interpretations at the end of the century. It recalls attention to the rationale and necessity of strategic bodies on the line during the marches, protests, and demonstrations, and the workings of capital in cultural contexts, by a recognition of the significance of commerce and financial units and by an understanding of the interconnectedness of business practices and social structures.<sup>100</sup>

Davis also argues that, through her choice of a Black female protagonist, Walker

“constructs the female body and its female progeny as the site through which the politics

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<sup>97</sup> McDowell 275

<sup>98</sup> Roberta M. Hendrickson, "Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian* and the Civil Rights Movement," *Melus* 24, no. 3 (1999): 111-128.

<sup>99</sup> Hendricks 113

<sup>100</sup> Davis 354

must be viewed.”<sup>101</sup> Thus she troubles the depiction of the Movement as dominated and led by charismatic male leaders.<sup>102</sup> In doing so, she re-writes the dominant narrative of the Movement, re-centering women and the importance of their contributions, similar to Robnett. In Walker’s version of history, women, not men, are the architects of liberation and the future.

Susan Danielson has argued that the novel’s depiction of the Civil Rights Movement performs a feminist critique of the Movement’s politics.<sup>103</sup> According to Danielson, Walker’s representation of the Movement in her novel highlights “the ‘inadequacies, contradictions between (the movement’s) reality and ideology.’”<sup>104</sup> She asserts, “By reflecting the personal core of the Movement away from public view of demonstrations, sit-ins, and marches, and onto the personal lives of its participants, Walker deepens our comprehension of what the Movement actually was and broadens the women’s discontent into a feminist interpretation of social events. Sexism, Alice Walker implies, permeated the already complex issues of race and class.”<sup>105</sup> I extend Danielson’s argument further and suggest that Walker’s depiction of women’s issues within the Movement from a feminist viewpoint explicitly engages with the women’s liberation movement and reflects her own contemporary relationships with it and white feminists.

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<sup>101</sup> Davis 359

<sup>102</sup> See Erica Edwards *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

<sup>103</sup> Susan Danielson, “Alice Walker’s Meridian, Feminism, and the ‘Movement,’” *Women’s Studies* 16: 3-4 (1989): 317-30.

<sup>104</sup> Danielson 318

<sup>105</sup> *ibid* 323

Meridian begins to reject her family's, especially her mother's, traditional values as a young girl. She eventually refuses to go to church and, after marrying young, has extramarital affairs to satisfy her curiosity about sex. When she is presented with the opportunity to attend Saxon college<sup>106</sup> in Atlanta, Meridian also rejects societal expectations of motherhood and gives her son up for adoption. At Saxon, her conservative women's college, Meridian chafes under the school's conservative gender and racial politics. Many aspects of the novel seem to be autobiographical. Saxon is a fictionalized version of the historically Black women's college Spelman, which Walker attended before transferring to Sarah Lawrence. At the time, Spelman, a bastion of middle class morals and conservative gender values, still required students to undergo pelvic exams during their first and third years "to police and regulate the sexuality of [its] students."<sup>107</sup> The school's mission was to "usher" its students "nearer to ladyhood every day. It was for this that their parents had sent them to Saxon college."<sup>108</sup> As such piety, chastity, and other hallmarks of conservative, middle class behavior were expected of and forced upon Saxon's students.

Meridian, whose past life, as mother and wife, makes her unlike her fellow students, feels out of place at Saxon. Joining the Atlanta Movement gives her purpose and drive. It is through her work in the Movement that Meridian meets Truman Held a young Black activist who attends the nearby men's college and who becomes her lover.

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<sup>106</sup> Interestingly, Nella Larsen named the similarly conservative all-girls college in her novel *Quicksand* Naxos.

<sup>107</sup> Rudolph P. Byrd, Introduction to *The World Has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker* (New York: The New Press, 2010), xxix.

<sup>108</sup> *Meridian* 27-29

Meridian's relationship with Truman runs throughout the novel. The second third of the book is even named after him. But the relationship in the novel that most interests me is not the one between Meridian and Truman, but rather between Meridian and Lynne.

In 1973 Walker told O'Brien, "My new novel [*Meridian*] is about several women who came of age during the sixties and were active (or not active) in the movement in the South. I am exploring their backgrounds, familial and sibling connections, their marriages, affairs, and political persuasions, as they grow toward a fuller realization (and recognition) of themselves."<sup>109</sup> In its final form, the novel is indeed about the intertwined lives of two women "who came of age during the sixties": Meridian and Lynne Rabinowitz. Although the two are initially portrayed as foils and connected only through their relationship with Truman, as each woman grows and changes so does the relationship between them.

Lynne is a white, Jewish exchange student from the North. She is portrayed as naïve. Lynne's experience accurately reflects that of many white, Jewish women who worked in the Movement. In *Going South*, her study of Jewish women who participated in the Movement, Debra L. Schultz argues that taking part in the Movement helped them challenge traditional gender roles but it also allowed them to work through their own ethnic identities. She writes,

Going south gave Jewish women a sense of agency and self-respect as women who demonstrated physical and moral courage. It showed them that there were alternatives to marrying a 'nice Jewish boy' and moving to the suburbs. And it

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<sup>109</sup> O'Brien 45



provided a sense of community and meaning that they did not find within the Jewish communities available to them. Yet it also puts things in perspective for them. It reminded them of their relative privileges as young white people only a generation or two removed from immigration and poverty.<sup>110</sup>

As with other white women, the Movement radicalized white Jewish women. It forced them to reckon with their own privilege and allowed them to form cross-racial alliances in the interest of social justice. But their experiences were not always positive, both for them and the Black activists in the Movement, a reality that Walker's novel portrays. Walker uses Lynne to disrupt utopic portrayals of interracial cooperation within the Movement. Instead she lays bare the racial conflicts that often occurred, especially between Black and white women.

Walker's depiction of Lynne's naiveté mirrors how Black women in the Movement viewed white women. One major complaint Black activists in SNCC had about white activists, especially white women, was that they "did not understand southern culture."<sup>111</sup> This lack of awareness manifested in how white women behaved around and toward the Black communities in which they worked. When Lynne and Truman canvas Black voters, Lynne's audacity, her ignorance about the region and its people, almost causes a confrontation. When Mabel Turner, a religious woman whom they are trying to convince to register to vote, reveals that she "don't believe in votin'" because the "good Lord take care of most of [her] problems," Lynne attempts to argue her over to her side,

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<sup>110</sup> Debra L. Schultz, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 82.

<sup>111</sup> Richardson quoted in Wini Breines, *The trouble between us: An uneasy history of black and white women in the feminist movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 38.

unlike Truman who realizes that Mrs. Turner would never agree to register to vote.<sup>112</sup> Lynne's retort—"So God fixes the road in front of your house, does he?"—causes Mrs. Turner who had previously treated Lynne and Truman kindly and fed them a home cooked meal, to wonder if "[Lynne] is kin to Judas Iscariot."<sup>113</sup> Because Lynne does not know enough about Southern Blacks or their lives to understand and honor their resistance to registering to vote, she risks making an enemy instead of an ally out of Mrs. Turner. Like the young woman's inappropriate dress, Lynne's ignorance, what Truman calls her "Northern logic,"<sup>114</sup> has the potential to alienate her from the very community she is attempting to help.<sup>115</sup>

Another impediment to peaceful interracial cooperation in the Movement was the existence of interracial sexual relationships between activists. Some have suggested that the prevalence of sexual liaisons between white women and Black men have been overstated in studies,<sup>116</sup> but, no matter the frequency of such unions, they caused tensions within the movement. White women pursued relationships with Black men for a variety of reasons. Many were motivated by sincere feelings of sexual attraction and desire for emotional intimacy. But these feelings were often complicated by other concerns. In her interviews of Jewish Movement activists, Schultz found, "Some [white Jewish women]

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<sup>112</sup> *Meridian* 102

<sup>113</sup> *ibid* 103

<sup>114</sup> *ibid* 102

<sup>115</sup> For a longer discussion of the "culturally insensitive behavior on the part of the white outsiders" during the Movement and the strife it often caused see Robnett 122-139.

<sup>116</sup> Wini Breines and Robnett both criticize some scholars of the Movement, including Evans's, for sensationalizing interracial sex in their studies. Similarly activist Gloria Richardson has expressed dismay at such representations, stating, "They act like people had a movement so they could have sexual relations!" (quoted in Robnett 131).

had relationships with Black men to experiment with their sexuality, to demonstrate their nonracism, and to ‘connect more fully to the movement.’”<sup>117</sup>

Indeed, Lynne’s assessment of Truman reveals these motivations. She tells Meridian,

“Oh I know [Truman] he’s not much...But he saved me from a fate worse than death. Because of him, I can never be as dumb as my mother was. Even if I practiced not knowing what the world is like, even if I lived in Scarsdale or some other weird place, and never had to eat welfare food in my life, I’d still *know*. By nature I’m not cut out to be a member of the oppressors. They’re ugly and don’t know poor people laugh at them and are just waiting to drag them out. No, Truman isn’t much but he’s *instructional*”<sup>118</sup>

Her romantic relationship with Truman and the ideas, communities, and realities that he exposed her to, profoundly changes Lynne. Her relationship with was “instructional” because it set her on a different life trajectory, committed to social justice and equality. Like the Jewish women activists Schultz describes, Lynne’s relationship with a Black man has both personal and political motivations and consequences.

One of the byproducts of sexual relationships between Black men and white women was tension between Black and white women. Amidst a struggle for racial solidarity and social justice, some Black women felt betrayed by Black men who had relations with white women. Their feelings of betrayal were more than mere sexual jealousy. For Movement activist Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, “discovering how the

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<sup>117</sup> Schultz 116

<sup>118</sup> *ibid* 198

whole world had this idea of white beauty” led her to “hat[e] white women so much it nearly made [her] crazy.”<sup>119</sup> When Black men chose white women, presumably over Black women, the oppressive racist beauty standards that assaulted them daily entered the supposedly safe space of the Movement, making it difficult to maintain trust and respect among activists.<sup>120</sup> As Meridian tells Lynne later in the novel, after Truman has left Lynne, she had to try “very hard not to hate [Lynne].”<sup>121</sup>

When Meridian discovers Truman has left her for Lynne, a white woman, she experiences similar feelings of shame and outrage. Shortly after Truman has begun dating the white exchange students, Meridian passes him on the street. She “feel[s] embarrassed to see him now that he was busy dating the exchange students.”<sup>122</sup> Part of the reason Meridian may be embarrassed is that Truman’s choice to date white woman could be attributed to the supposedly emasculating and undesirable characteristics of Black women described above. As Breines notes, “some male writers used the supposedly overbearing characteristics of the black woman to defend black man’s ‘escape’ to the white woman.”<sup>123</sup> Thus embarrassment is not the only emotion Truman’s appearance evokes in Meridian, she is also “ashamed”: “It was strange and unfair, but the fact that he dated them—and so obviously because their color made them interesting—made *her* ashamed,

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<sup>119</sup> quoted in Breines 39

<sup>120</sup> According to CORE and SNCC activist Jimmy Garrett, black women believed “they could not develop relationships with the black men because the men didn’t have to be responsible to them because they could always hook up with some white woman who had come down” (Garrett quoted in Evans 88).

<sup>121</sup> *Meridian* 191

<sup>122</sup> *ibid* 108

<sup>123</sup> Breines 61

as if she were less.”<sup>124</sup> Here Meridian recognizes the social capital that some Black men felt they gained by sleeping with or dating a white woman, the thrill that they got from finally possessing something that they had been so long denied.<sup>125</sup> Wallace links Black men’s desire for white women not only to the fetishization of whiteness—“White fever,” she calls it—but also to the long history of white men’s access to and control of Black men and women’s bodies.<sup>126</sup> For some Black men during the Movement, sleeping with white women allowed them to enjoy a privilege previously reserved, by law, custom, and violence, for white men and thus to approximate the societal privilege white men enjoyed. Their choice to date or sleep with white women, whether motivated by a desire to exercise a kind of patriarchal privilege or simply experiment with a group they considered exotic, caused many Black women to feel slighted and betrayed.

Lynne is a casualty of SNCC’s jettisoning of interracial organizing. Walker writes, “the Movement itself was changing. Lynne was no longer welcome at any of the meetings. She was excluded from the marches. She was no longer allowed to write articles for the paper.”<sup>127</sup> Truman’s Black male colleagues criticize him for dating a white woman, blaming Lynne for the racially-motivated shooting of Tommy Odds, who loses an arm as a result. Her presence as a white woman among Black men puts them in danger. Later Odds rapes Lynne, motivated by his anger at her and what she represents and the twin desperate desire for that same thing—proximity to whiteness and power. Lynne does not resist, does not scream during the assault because of the deep guilt she

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<sup>124</sup> *Meridian* 108

<sup>125</sup> Evans 79

<sup>126</sup> Michele Wallace (1979) 12.

<sup>127</sup> *Meridian* 146

feels about what she has done or not done and the profound power over Black male life that her word as a white woman wields: She wished she could go to the police, but she was more afraid of them than she was of Tommy Odds, because they would attack young Black men in the community indiscriminately, and the people she wanted most to see protected would suffer.”<sup>128</sup>

Lynne goes on to sleep with other Black male activists, perversely cherishing their fetishization of her whiteness as she becomes further and further alienated from the Movement. Eventually “the [black] women found out. They began to curse her and to threaten her, attacking her physically, some of them. And she began perversely to enjoy their misguided rage, to use it as acknowledgment of her irresistible qualities.”<sup>129</sup> Lynne becomes more and more isolated from the Black women and begins to actively antagonize them by combing her long, straight hair, a symbol of her “superior” white beauty in front of them.

Even though both Lynne and Meridian are abandoned by Truman and the victim of sexual violence by other men—Meridian is the subject of the unwanted advances of her college benefactor and the doctor who performs her abortion barter sexual access to her body in return for tying her tubes—this is not sufficient to connect them or make them allies. Although neither Lynne nor Meridian are actively involved in the Women’s Liberation Movement, their relationship is complicated by similar tensions, in particular Lynne’s relationship with Truman. But once Meridian ends her sexual and romantic

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid 176

<sup>129</sup> ibid 181

relationship with Truman, this changes. Meridian actually refuses to sleep with Truman “for Lynne’s sake,” because he is all Lynne has now that her child has died.<sup>130</sup> When she rebuffs his advances, Truman declares that Lynne has “Everything,” because “She’s still an American white woman.”<sup>131</sup> Meridian responds, “Is that so easy?”<sup>132</sup> Time has passed and Meridian no longer thinks white women are “frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy and without ingenuity.”<sup>133</sup> Now she can see how Lynne, too, has suffered because she is a woman, one who chose to marry a Black man and have his child.

Ultimately, it is the death of Lynne and Truman’s daughter Camara that brings the two women together. Walker writes,

The absence of the child herself was what had finally brought them together. Together they had sustained a loss not unlike the loss of Martin Luther King or Malcolm X or George Jackson. They grieved more because the child, Camara ... had been small—six years old—and had died after horrible things were done to her. They knew her suffering did not make her unique; but knowing that crimes of passion or hatred against children are not considered unique in a society where children are not particularly valued, failed to comfort them.<sup>134</sup>

Meridian is the first person Truman calls when he learns that Camara has died. She comforts both him and Lynne as they grieve. Her emotional and physical support sustains them; together, “they had drained her dry.”<sup>135</sup> While Meridian comforts Lynne, they talk,

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<sup>130</sup> *ibid* 147

<sup>131</sup> *ibid*

<sup>132</sup> *ibid*

<sup>133</sup> *ibid* 108

<sup>134</sup> *ibid* 191

<sup>135</sup> *ibid* 188

watch movies, and bond. “They waited for the pain of Camara’s death to lessen. They waited to ask forgiveness of each other. They waited until they could talk again....”<sup>136</sup>

It is during this period that Meridian tells Lynne, “I tried very hard not to hate you. And I think I always succeeded.”<sup>137</sup> Mourning Camara together allows Lynne and Meridian to overcome their past and forgive each other. As women, without Truman, they mourn Camara’s death in a way that Truman seems unable or unwilling to do. And as women, together they mourn the next generation, the loss of the Black girl child and future she embodied. They share the loss and the feeling of dismay at the cruelty of the world they inhabit.

But the novel cannot and does not imagine a successful alliance between Lynne and Meridian. When Lynne tells Meridian about her rape, Meridian rejects it. She cannot hear it. “I can’t listen to this,” she says.<sup>138</sup> When Lynne presses her, Meridian reiterates her position: “Can’t you understand I can’t listen to you? Can’t you understand there are some things I don’t want to know?”<sup>139</sup> The specter of historical violence—“lynchings and the way white women have always lied about black men raping them,” as Lynne puts it—prevents Meridian from sympathizing with her *as a woman*.<sup>140</sup> Meridian’s is torn between her racial solidarity and her identity as a woman. Ultimately, she chooses to stay ignorant

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<sup>136</sup> *ibid* 191

<sup>137</sup> *ibid*

<sup>138</sup> *ibid* 164

<sup>139</sup> *ibid* 165

<sup>140</sup> *ibid* 164. See Nellie Y. McKay’s essay “Alice Walker’s ‘Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells’: A Struggle Toward Sisterhood” in *Rape and Representation* (1991) for an analysis of how Walker depicts this tension in this short story. Also see Valerie Smith’s exploration of this issue, “Split Affinities: Representing Interracial Rape” in *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender* (1998).



of Black men's violence against white women and prevents Lynne from sharing the story of her rape.<sup>141</sup>

Although their relationship does not blossom into one of explicit political solidarity, the act of mourning and the bonding that occurs through it opens up the possibility of just such an alliance, even if it is not realized in the novel. The section of the novel titled "Lynne" that immediately follows the section titled "Two Women," which details how Lynne and Meridian mourn Camara, resolves the tension of the revelation of the interracial rape years later with a hopeful exchange:

"‘Besides,’ she [Lynne] continued, ‘nobody’s perfect.’

‘Except white women,’ said Meridian, and winked.

‘Yes,’ said Lynne, ‘but their time will come’”<sup>142</sup>

Walker's characters gesture towards the future which is actually on the horizon if not already a part of the moment from which Walker is writing.

Walker's short story "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells" is structured around a similar disclosure of interracial rape. The unnamed, semi-autobiographical protagonist, of "Advancing Luna" befriends a white woman, Luna, during a summer spent registering voters in the South. Years later the two reconnect as roommates in New York City, where

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<sup>141</sup> This is not to say that black and white women were never able to form interracial coalitions devoted to fighting sexual assault. Historian Ann Valk has documented one such coalition in Washington, D.C. in her book *Radical Sisters: Second Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C.* (Bloomington, IN: University of Illinois Press, 2007)

<sup>142</sup> *Meridian* 198

they quickly develop an intimate friendship, which “provided a stability and comfort we both needed at that time.”<sup>143</sup>

One night Luna reveals that she was assaulted by a Black activist and It is worth quoting that passage at length here:

It was while we lived on East 9<sup>th</sup> Street that she told me she had been raped during her summer in the South. It is hard for me, even now, to relate my feeling of horror and incredulity. This was some time before Eldridge Cleavers wrote of being a rapist/revolutionary; of ‘practicing’ on black women before moving on to white. It was also, unless I’m mistaken, before LeRoi Jones (as he was then known; now of course Imamu Baraka, which has an even more presumptuous meaning than ‘the King’) wrote his advice to young black male insurrectionaries (women were not told what to do with *their* rebelliousness): ‘Rape the white girls. Rape their fathers.’ It was clear that he meant this literally and also as: to rape a white girl *is* to rape her father. It was this misogynous cruelty of this latter meaning that was habitually lost on black women (on men in general actually), but nearly always perceived and rejected by women of whatever color.<sup>144</sup>

The conversation that ensues about the lack of screaming is startlingly similar to the Lynne and Meridian’s exchange. The specter of lynch mobs and Emmett Till, the history of white women’s ability to sentence Black men to death with a mere accusation, haunts their conversation. The protagonist describes her reaction: “Suddenly I was embarrassed. Then angry. Very, very angry. *How dare she tell me this!* I thought.”<sup>145</sup> The disclosure

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<sup>143</sup> Alice Walker, “Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: WW Norton, 1997), 2397. Originally published in *You Can’t Keep A Good Woman Down* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

<sup>144</sup> *ibid* 2397-2398.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid* 2398

has an immediate effect on the women's friendship: "Before she told me about the rape, I think we had assumed a lifelong friendship..."<sup>146</sup>

This conversation in the short story is followed by a section in which the speaker engages in an imaginary exchange with legendary anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells, who is hailed in the story's title. And the structure of the short story, which has two later, belated, alternate endings fruitfully attempts to work out the impasse that this triangular relationship sets up, but the answer, ultimately is absenting the Black man.

The short story is unable to imagine a satisfying resolution to the issue. The narrator imagines alternate endings, staging them as a writer, as problems she attempts to solve. In one of these alternate endings/postscripts, the writer/Walker stages a healing conversation between Luna and her rapists, imagining what might have happened behind closed doors when the two shared a bed when he came to New York and had nowhere else to stay:

I have forced them to talk until they reached the stumbling block of the rape, which they must remove themselves, before proceeding to a place from which it will be possible to insist on a society in which Luna's word alone on rape can never be used to intimidate an entire people, and in which an innocent black man's protestation of innocence of rape is unprejudicially heard. Until such a society is created, relationships of affection between black men and white women will always be poisoned—from within as from without—by historical fear and the threat of violence, and solidarity among black and white women is only rarely likely to exist.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> *ibid* 2400.

<sup>147</sup> *ibid* 2403-2404.

The revelation of interracial rape is an impediment to cross-racial feminist solidarity because of the overly weighted history of the crime and the narrative surrounding it, as the imagined interlocutor of Wells tells the narrator of the short story.

Both *Meridian* and “Advancing Luna” contain critiques of Black Power’s masculinity, depicting the emotional vulnerability of Black Nationalist activists as cracks in a mythic veneer. They are just men, weak, and flawed, and their politics are insufficient for fashioning a radical praxis that will successfully combat the intertwined – isms that Walker writes “poison” the world and relationships between Black and white women. In contrast, Walker’s protagonist Meridian’s radical political praxis of love eschews violence. Thadious Davis observes, Meridian’s “readiness for struggle and battle includes forgiveness and love, and with them an unwavering commitment to spiritual revolution as power within a very material world.”<sup>148</sup> Her approach to protest and political change refuses to abandon or ignore her own or others’ humanity. Because Meridian opposes rather than enacts violence, she is able to continue the struggle, in the South, among the people beyond the Movement proper.

In this context, Truman’s taking up of Meridian’s shack and her cap is atonement for his wrong-doing and marks the end of Meridian’s sacrificial strong Black woman undertakings, her excessive physical and emotional labor that she performs both for individuals and for the Movement at large, keeping it alive in her heart and her actions. By assuming her place, Truman rejects his masculinist politics and accepts the productive

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<sup>148</sup> Thadious Davis, *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature* (Raleigh, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 362.

possibilities of Meridian's methods. It does not appear in the novel, but the reader may assume that Truman is now willing to do the work. This critique of Black masculinity's universal toxicity and of history's weight opens up space for intimacy between Black and white women. Walker's poetry about the CRM, specifically the title poem of her '68 collection *Once*, acknowledge the loss white women activists experienced during the CRM, rejection from family etc., and the affective and physical closeness of the period's interracial activism. In Walker's fiction, affective connection can and does exist between Black and white women.

### *Reception & Conclusion*

Walker who had always been proud of her work perhaps at times even prideful, was confident about the strength of her second novel. In November of 1975, after a series of edits under the guidance of her new editor Tony Godwin, after Haydn's death, Walker sent Godwin the manuscript "for the last time." She wrote, "It is a good book. I also think it is possible for it to do very well, if it is promoted vigorously. Although Harcourt has not yet promoted any book of mine vigorously enough, I hope this time will be different. We will get, I believe, excellent pre-publication quotes."<sup>149</sup> Walker's choice to cross out the words "I think" before her declaration of the high quality of her novel, underscores how she was growing into her writerly identity with the publication of her second novel. Although she was confident, Walker knew that her book was unusual and attempted to explain its merits to Godwin. She wrote,

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<sup>149</sup> Letter to Godwin, November 6, 1975.

One thing I want you to know, especially, and that is, this book is not out of the European tradition, which, frankly, I am glad of. If anything, I have looked to (as I told you) my own black American tradition of Toomer, Hurston, The slave narratives, etc., and to South American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Some of our (yours and mine) difference of opinion comes out of our different cultures and cultural expectations. I have felt as if I were fighting against your expectations... and even now, as I'm trying to tell you how truly special my book is, I realize you won't be able to see it because you have not done the reading in this country's literature, that would permit you to see it. This is frustrating to me, and depressing...It is an important book, but not everyone will see that.<sup>150</sup>

As she had with *Grange* and would years later with *The Color Purple*, Walker linked her artistic vision and the core of her work to Black Southern culture. In some way, when her work was overlooked, Walker felt that so too were her people. Nonetheless, Walker demanded that her publisher do right by her.

Walker was disappointed by the critical reception of *Meridian*. She believed that many reviewers did not understand the novel or what she was attempting to do with it. Unlike *Grange*, which Walker believes was “easy for the critics to deal with,” in her second novel, Walker admitted, “there’s just a lot going on.”<sup>151</sup> As a way of wrangling with its complexity—the non-linear timeline, lyrical prose, and magical realist elements—reviewers often “[took] little parts of the book, never treating it in their entirety,”<sup>152</sup> which frustrated Walker who believed the novel deserved more care. Although it did receive some favorable reviews, it seems that *Meridian* was not released

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Tate 178

<sup>152</sup> Tate 177

in paperback until the publication of *The Color Purple*, which the publisher hoped would drive interest in Walker's earlier work.<sup>153</sup>

Even though *Meridian* may not have inspired much critical interest at first, it did spark passionate, often extreme reactions from readers. Steinem, who read early drafts and provided a blurb for the cover, called *Meridian* the next "great American novel."<sup>154</sup> Other white women were taken by Walker's depiction of Lynne. She told Tate in 1983, "every Jewish 'girl' I meet under fifty is Lynn or thinks she is. And they claim a) Lynn's a stereotype, or b) she's just like them."<sup>155</sup> After reading the novel, Pam Allen wrote that she had done some of the same things Lynne had during her time in the Movement and taken the same risks, like socializing with Black men, because of ignorance. As such, she praised "the scenes bout [sic] the Tommy Odds" as well as Walker's depiction of "the sexism and racism interacting in the relationships between white and black men."<sup>156</sup> Many acquaintances of Walker's in fact believed the character was based on them. Walker's archive contains a furious letter from a woman who signs on her initials, who had apparently known Walker when she was living in Mississippi. She tells Walker she is "angry and disgusted" by the depiction, and accuses Walker of "evad[ing] the truth" by saying "that all [her] 'white woman friends' saw themselves in Lynne and isn't 'that interesting'"<sup>157</sup> M. goes on to list all of the characteristics she shares with Lynne that she believes prove the character is based on her. She concludes the letter, "you've used me

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<sup>153</sup> There is a flyer in Walker's papers advertising a paperback edition of *Meridian* to "For everyone who loved *The Color Purple*."

<sup>154</sup> Letter from Steinem to Walker, mid 1975.

<sup>155</sup> Tate 178

<sup>156</sup> Letter from Pam Allen, April 28, 1976.

<sup>157</sup> Letter from M, May 13, 1976.

and betrayed me outrageously. You can't pretend that Lynne just happens to resemble me. If you're going to put me in a book, put me in it or leave me totally out.”<sup>158</sup> Walker denied that Lynne was based on M. She appears to have been a representation of a type of woman that she knew during the Movement.

Walker seems to have been surprised that, as she wrote in a letter in 1979, “many white women can not [sic] deal with Meridian itself.”<sup>159</sup> Although she told Pam Allen that she had not written *Meridian* specifically for or to engage with Black men, it is unclear exactly who she intended the book for.<sup>160</sup> Interestingly, Walker asked her publisher to send it out for review to many white feminists, including Tillie Olsen and Adrienne Rich.<sup>161</sup> I see this move as marking more than simply a desire to garner praise for *Meridian* from established white feminist writers. I believe it also indicates how at this time in her life and with this novel, Walker was in dialogue with white feminists and the women's movement. It may not have been the central theme of the novel but it was certainly a piece.

In 1981 Walker described the reaction to *Meridian* in a letter to Adrienne Rich, writing, “I realized, when I got no response from black or white feminists about Meridian that there was a lot of resistance to my view of my own experience. And I was disappointed. But eventually taught a great deal—about fear & resistance & many other things.” Walker continued, linking Rich's recent interpretation of the novel to her own feeling regarding Rich's writing, “I'm glad you can read it now without feeling

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<sup>158</sup> *ibid*

<sup>159</sup> Letter to Janet Sternberg, October, 11, 1979.

<sup>160</sup> Letter to Pam Allen, 1977.

<sup>161</sup> Letter to Godwin, November 6, 1975.



threatened by my anger or experience. But this feeling of resistance works both ways, too. I remember how horrified & mad I felt reading, in Of Woman Born, about your sense of ‘unconditional love’ from your black maid. Talk about appropriation! Thought I, Where are that woman’s own children?” Walker marks how distrust and discomfort occur in both directions in relationships between Black and white women. Just as Rich seems to have objected to Walker’s depiction of white women in *Meridian*, Walker is upset by how Rich’s depiction of her Black maid reinforces stereotypes of Black servitude and erases Black women’s own children. It is surprising that, as Walker implies, Rich was perhaps not able to appreciate *Meridian* when it was first published, even though she adored *In Love & Trouble*. In 1974, Rich wrote Walker and called the short story collection “an amazing book,” the range and depth of which “is such that any existing stereotype of the Black Woman is shattered for all time.”<sup>162</sup> Even Rich, who was well ahead of other white women in the mid-seventies as far as her understanding of the importance of recognizing women of color’s voices, and who famously stood in solidarity with Walker and Audre Lorde in 1974, sharing the National Book Award for poetry with them, as the three had agreed beforehand, would also be resistant to Walker’s ideas about relationships between Black and white women.

Unlike *Meridian*, when *The Color Purple* was published in 1982 it was enthusiastically embraced by both Black and white feminists. Like the conversation between Lynne and Meridian in the novel, at the time of its publication the conditions in which Black and white women could form solidarity had not yet arrived. *Meridian* was

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<sup>162</sup> Letter from Adrienne Rich, July 29, 1974.

ahead of its time in many ways in tackling issues between Black and white women, but it provides a potential roadmap for interracial reconciliation and coalition building between Black and white women, and foreshadowed positive interracial collaborations that were to come.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### **The Power of Poetry: Pat Parker, Audre Lorde, and Feminist Literary Culture in the 1970s and 1980s**

#### *Introduction*

In 1969 while in California for poetry readings,<sup>163</sup> Audre Lorde “wanted to know what Black women were into.” Her host introduced her to a Black lesbian poet living in Oakland named Pat Parker. This meeting was the beginning of a decades long friendship between the two women. They shared an identity as Black lesbian poets and the experience of occupying those identities in lesbian feminist communities that were overwhelmingly white. Years later, Parker wrote a poem about their friendship titled “For Audre.” The poem captures the long periods of separation between them, the inconsistency of their communication (phone calls missed, letters not replied to, etc.), but also emphasizes their profound connection:

I carry you with me  
talk with you  
ask your opinion  
  
you cannot give me up  
I cannot give you up.

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<sup>163</sup> Lorde says they met in 1969. In letters from that time Parker claims they met in 1971/1972.

We are linked  
in  
our Blackness  
our creativity  
our queerness  
our muses conspire.

Although they were very different women in personalities and age (Lorde was ten years older than Parker), they were linked by their shared experiences of Blackness and queerness and a love of poetry. This chapter is not about the friendship Lorde and Parker shared. Instead, I use their experiences on opposite coasts of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s to explore how feminist publishing apparatuses and reading communities were a primary site of contact with white feminists for Black feminist women.

When Amiri Baraka's wrote, "we need 'poems that kill,'" he was describing the political mission of the Black Arts Movement, the cultural corollary to Black Power and Black nationalist movements in the 1970s. But Black members of Black nationalist movements were not the only people using poetry as a political tool during this period. Black women who did not fit into Black nationalist visions of radical domesticity and race motherhood because of their sexuality were also writing political poetry during this period and their work frequently explored themes of gender, sexuality, as well as race and racism that consumed by feminist audiences.

In this chapter, I examine black women poets' participation in the feminist and lesbian publishing and reading communities during the 1970s and 80s in the United States. I focus primarily on the work and experiences of Black lesbian feminist poets Lorde and Parker, but also address less prolific poets and writers whose work was key to sustaining these institutions. I argue that in the wake of a declining Black Arts Movement, which had not been accepting of women or queer persons and the explosion of women's publishing, black women, black lesbian poets in particular, found new audiences for their work in feminist circles. Black women like Lorde and Parker used their poetry and their activist work to increase awareness of racism and racial issues in the women's movement in addition to building their careers and livelihoods as writers in the 1970s and 80s. It was as part of feminist consciousness raising groups, presses, writing collectives, and other groups that black women interacted with white feminists during what is commonly known as the second wave feminist movement.

As I demonstrate in the previous chapter, the Women's Liberation movement's structure and tactics were heavily influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. In addition to adopting the CRM's insurgent, non-violent protest style and grassroots organizational structure, the Women's Liberation Movement understood the importance of the written word in disseminating their message and growing their movement. The growth of independent feminist and lesbian presses in the 1970s laid the groundwork for the explosion of the movement by connecting women around the country. The infrastructure of feminist publishing benefitted women writers who were able to grow audiences for their work using feminist bookstores and plan readings tours to feminist groups and

bookstores as tour stops and reading sites. Black women's participation in this literary culture created and sustained by feminist bookstores and independent literary publications exposed them to predominantly white feminist and lesbian communities centered around those spaces and connected them to other black women as well. While participating in these communities, black women developed an intersectional, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, inclusive feminist politics.

I argue that poetry was a crucial form through which black women explored and developed their version(s) of feminism. As Lorde has argued, "poetry [was] not a luxury" for these women; in fact, it was a crucial tool for survival and self-making. Many black poets, including Lorde and Parker, came of age during the Black Arts Movement, the creative arm of the Black Power Movement, and subscribed to its aesthetic and political tenets, which valorized blackness. But black women artists did not necessarily agree with the BAM and Black Power's conservative gender and sexual politics. Black women writers were not content to simply fulfill heteronormative roles as wives and supporters for black male leaders. Cheryl Clarke has shown how black women poets of the BAM pushed back against restrictive mores about traditional performances of gender and sexuality and created space for themselves, their work, and their desires within the movement.<sup>164</sup> As I demonstrate, many of these women, mostly poets, also found audiences for their work and supportive communities outside of Black nationalist groups. These women sought out and, when necessary, created feminist communities linked to

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<sup>164</sup> See Cheryl Clarke, *"After Mecca": Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement*. Rutgers University Press, 2005.

writing and activism, in which there was space for black women to express alternative gender and sexual identities alongside their commitment to anti-racism.

That is to say that poetry was not just an important genre but also an institution in feminist communities that brought black women into contact and collaboration with white women. I argue that the spaces created by writing groups, reading series, feminist bookshops, and literary tours were key locations of Lorde and Parker's work and theorizing as well as sites in which they came into contact with white women and had to wrestle with issues of racial difference like tokenism and racial fetishism. As a result of their experiences in these spaces both women developed their own brand(s) of Black feminism that honored their gender, sexuality, and racial identity.

*"A Movement of Poets": Poetry and Feminist Publishing*

With the title of her 1982 study, feminist poet and critic Jan Clausen declared the second-wave feminist movement "A Movement of Poets." Clausen's study examines the role poetry has played in the growth of the feminist movement during the 1970s in the United States and the development of a particularly feminist poetic aesthetic and politics. She describes the place of poetry within the feminist movement thusly:

It might even be claimed, at the risk of some exaggeration, that poets *are* the movement. Certainly poets are some of feminism's most influential activists, theorists, and spokeswomen; at the same time, poetry has become a favorite

means of self-expression, consciousness-raising, and communication among large numbers of women not publicly known as poets.<sup>165</sup>

I would take Clausen's argument a step further and suggest that poets were important not only to the second wave feminist movement as a whole but also, perhaps especially, to the development of lesbian and black feminisms as discrete theoretical and activist traditions. Both lesbians and black women created spaces for themselves within the larger feminist movement using poetry. Their poetry both documented their unique experiences and, when disseminated to and read by women across the country, built networks and communities of support for women who otherwise would not have known others like them existed. This was especially true for black lesbian women.

Poetry was the central form in the explosion of feminist literary culture during the 1970s. Women turned to poetry in part because, as Jan Clausen argues, it was less intimidating than prose. Audre Lorde proposes that poetry appealed to women, especially "poor, working class, and Colored women" because it was "the most economical [of forms]." <sup>166</sup> For Lorde, the appeal of poetry was not only that "it requires the least physical labor, the least material" but also that it "can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, and on scraps of surplus paper." <sup>167</sup> Unlike prose forms, such as the novel, poetry lends itself to writing in the brief pockets found between family life and busy work schedules that often made up poor and women of colors' lives. Poetry was

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<sup>165</sup> Jan Clausen, *A Movement of Poets: Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism* (Brooklyn, NY: Long Haul Press, 1975), 5.

<sup>166</sup> Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 116.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid



economically preferable for publishers as well. As Kayann Short writes in her study of the link between feminist publishing and the development of the U.S. feminist movement, “it [poetry] generally required not only less paper and ink than fiction or non-fiction, but less labor in the form of typing or typesetting, copy-editing, printing, and binding. It is no coincidence that the first books produced by early presses were volumes of poetry.”<sup>168</sup> Given that early feminist presses often used secondhand, older technology to print their titles, the labor involved in preparing and printing, often meaning cranking the machines by hand, prose works was prohibitively difficult and expensive.<sup>169</sup>

Despite poetry’s reputation as opaque form, which readers need advanced education and skills to decipher the meaning of, feminists preferred poetry for its power to plainly communicate women’s inner voices and struggles. Lorde references this reputation, what she calls a “european mode” of thinking, in her discussion of the power of poetry in her essay “Poetry is not a Luxury.” Poetry, Lorde argues, is not the “sterile world play that...the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean” but instead “a revelatory distillation of experience.”<sup>170</sup> If, Lorde argues, women reject the European mode of thinking, which is solely intellectual, and merge it with what she calls their “ancient, non-european consciousness of living,” they will be better able to understand and express their feelings, to access “those hidden sources of our power from where true

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<sup>168</sup> Kayann Short, “Publishing Feminism in the Women’s Press Movement, 1969-1994” (Ph.D. diss., University of Colorado, 1994), 14.

<sup>169</sup> Short, 14.

<sup>170</sup> Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes.”<sup>171</sup> Poetry is the form that best allows women to “give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed but already felt.”<sup>172</sup> Poetry, Lorde writes, enables the “transpos[ition of feelings] into a language so they can be shared.”<sup>173</sup> Thus, according to Lorde, writing poetry allows women to access and express their feelings and, subsequently, to create change in the world. In other words, in the context of the feminist movement, writing poetry allowed women to articulate their individual beliefs and experience as well as a general politics produced by those experiences.

Clausen echoes and builds upon Lorde’s claims when she writes, “for many feminists, as for me, poetry represented the clearest opportunity for the direct statement of women’s experience; it was the literary counterpart of C-R groups’ attempt at breaking down the distinction between the personal and the political.”<sup>174</sup> The writing, sharing, and publication of feminist poetry of the 1970s and 1980s served as a means of theorizing and communicating the diversity of women’s individual experiences and the translation of those experiences across difference in a way that enabled coalition building. Ideally, feminist poetry, like feminist politics, linked the personal and the political.

Clausen’s analysis of the purpose and features of feminist poetry produce during the 1970s, explicate the political purpose of the form. She identifies six tenets of feminist poetry. Each of the tenants is primarily political but they all have aesthetic implications. For example, “feminist poetry is useful,” “feminist poetry is accessible,” and “feminist

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<sup>171</sup> *ibid*

<sup>172</sup> *ibid* 36

<sup>173</sup> *ibid* 37

<sup>174</sup> Clausen 12

poetry is ‘about’ specific subject matter” all mark feminist poetry’s commitment to inclusiveness and its rejection of what Lorde calls the “sterility” of white, patriarchal, European poetry. Poetry in the women’s movement was in the service of larger political goals. It both advanced and demonstrated values like inclusiveness and also served to disseminate radical feminist politics.

Clausen’s fourth tenet of feminist poetry—“Feminist poetry is a collective product or process; the individual ego plays a minimal role in its creation”<sup>175</sup>—marks the importance of community and collaboration to the women’s movement. Clausen explains this tenet as follows: “More prevalent among feminists than insistence on a collective voice is our emphasis on the collective process of feminist poetry, its emergence from a network of mutual influence and support without which our work would, for most of us, be inconceivable.”<sup>176</sup> The practice of feminist poetry created communities and institutions that, in turn, sustained feminist poets and their work. These institutions included small feminist presses, bookstores, magazines, and writers’ conferences.

Most of early feminist publishing was done by independent presses, which were largely lesbian-run. Because black women, especially black queer women, struggled to have their work published by BAM presses, their work was often published by these independent feminist publishers. Broadside Press, for example, published many influential black writers in the 1960s and 70s, including black women. But, although Broadside published Lorde’s collection *From A Land Where Other People Live* in 1973,

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<sup>175</sup> Clausen 31

<sup>176</sup> *ibid* 32

she was asked by editor and founded Dudley Randall to remove “Love Poem,” which described her love for another woman, from the manuscript.<sup>177</sup> Early in her career, Lorde participated in workshops with the Harlem Writers Guild, a black writing group whose mostly male members subscribed to Pan-Africanist and Black nationalist ideology. In part because of her queerness, Lorde “felt [she] was tolerated but never really accepted.”<sup>178</sup> Lesbian feminist publications and presses published black women and black queer women early on and helped them reach new audiences. In stark contrast to black nationalist presses, Lorde often found that her depictions of queer sexual desire and feminist politics were welcome at feminist presses and publications.

Although Kirsten Hogan does not write about poetry in particular in her study *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability*, her arguments about the ideological and activist work done by lesbian feminist bookwomen are worth turning to here. Hogan argues that lesbian feminists were the vanguard of feminist bookculture, both as publishers, bookstore owners, and writers. They brought with them a commitment to interracial coalition building and anti-racist politics and praxis that shaped the rest of the movement. According to Hogan, feminist bookwomen’s reading practices were about more than reading, they “informed relational practices” that

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<sup>177</sup> Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: WW Norton and Co., 2004), 130-131; Lorde, “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.” In *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 99. Broadside also published Lorde’s collection *New York Headshop and Museum* in 1974.

<sup>178</sup> Lorde, “An Interview” 91.

fostered an interracial, anti-racist lesbian feminist movement.<sup>179</sup> By examining the personal stories of feminist bookwomen, the bookstores they created and ran, and the centrality of anti-racist praxis to their work, Hogan's study participates in a pattern of recent scholarship that writes against the belief that second wave feminism was, at least in its early years, entirely white. Instead, her work "documents 1970s feminism as already lesbian and multiracial";<sup>180</sup> this is not to claim that early feminist communities were utopian spaces of interracial cooperation but rather highlights how some feminist communities were not racially homogenous.

I turn to Hogan and Short's work now because it illuminates some of the reasons that black (queer) women like Lorde and Parker became so well known in feminist circles. The first feminist press in the United States was Shameless Hussy Press, founded in 1969 by the poet Alta. The press would go on to publish the first edition of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is not enuf* in 1976. Although feminist presses were expensive and difficult to start, by the mid-1970s several major feminist presses were operating in the United States: the Women's Press Collective in Oakland, Diana Press in Baltimore, Shameless Hussy Press in Berkeley, and Daughters, Inc. Together the catalogs of these presses stocked a growing network of feminist bookstores across the nation and even internationally. In turn, these bookstores became venues for feminist reading groups, poetry readings, and where individual women could locate books that spoke to their interests and concerns as

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<sup>179</sup> Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement: Lesbian Antiracism and Feminist Accountability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), xvii

<sup>180</sup> *ibid* xx

women, which were often not available from mainstream publishers or in other bookstores.

Both Hogan and Short use the story of the founding of the Women's Press Collective, specifically the experiences with feminist literature that led Judy Grahman and Wendy Cadden, who were lovers at the time, to found the press as an example of how feminist bookstores and presses contributed to and shaped the women's movement. They describe how Cadden discovered feminist books that she felt "changed her life" and sought with Grahman to publish and distribute texts like it to the women she knew.<sup>181</sup> Short terms the founding narrative of the Women's Press Collective a "circulatory tale" because "it relies heavily upon a sense of mobility, of what Grahman and Seajay refer to as 'getting women out in the world.'"<sup>182</sup> This sense of mobility marks the movement of women through different spaces, social movements, and across the country by which feminist texts circulated. Women would buy books at feminist bookstores, conferences, or concerts and then share those texts with their friends. In this way, those texts, their authors, and their ideas spread, through this feminist literary network, much farther than they might otherwise have. As Short describes, this circulation "operates on both a metaphorical and literal level, for 'by pulling each out into the world' Grahman and Seajay meant both getting women's *ideas* into circulation and getting women themselves out of the circumscribed spheres of home and community."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Hogan 9-13; Short 9.

<sup>182</sup> Short 4.

<sup>183</sup> *ibid*

Short's concept of a feminist printing "apparatus" is a useful model for understanding the interplay between feminist bookstore, publishing, and feminist writers. After citing the etymology of the word "apparatus," she writes,

The critical emphasis unifying these definitions is the relationship *between* individual elements working together toward a common goal... Within the print apparatus of feminist production, none of the elements listed above [production, promotion, distribution, message, and reception] stands as origin. Rather, all function as interconnected nodes within a feminist system of exchange in which books become vehicles for the transferal of feminist ideology while at the same time feminist ideology works to create the conditions under which new books are manufactured.<sup>184</sup>

Feminist publishers and feminist bookstores had what Short calls a "symbiotic relationship" with "the women's liberation and feminist/lesbian movements."<sup>185</sup> She writes, "The job of the feminist presses, then, was to provide a space where feminism could be imagined."<sup>186</sup> Feminism was "imagined" in the texts feminist bookwomen chose to print and sell, the events and conversations had both about these books and in the bookstores, as well as the communities of women created by and around feminist bookstores and bookculture, what Hogan calls "a feminist literary counterpublic."<sup>187</sup> The feminist literary "apparatus" or "counterpublic" was also a site of education. One of the major topics of discussion and education in lesbian feminist bookculture was racial difference and anti-racism. As such, sites within the network of feminist bookculture were spaces that included and encouraged the intersectional, anti-racist critiques of black

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<sup>184</sup> *ibid* 10

<sup>185</sup> *ibid* 4

<sup>186</sup> *ibid* 8

<sup>187</sup> *ibid* 7

(queer) women like Lorde and Parker. Not only were black women part of a network that produced and sustained the feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s, their concerns were sometimes central to the project of literary (lesbian) feminist culture.

For Hogan, the Information Center Incorporated (ICI): A Woman's Place bookstore and its publishing counterpart the Women's Press Collective in Oakland, California demonstrate the linkage between anti-racism and lesbian feminism within feminist bookculture. The institutions' commitment to inclusive, multi-culturalism began with its membership. Grahn, who founded the press with Wendy Cadden described the composition of the collect thusly:

Both Wendy and I really believe in multi-cultural society—so we made sure that the press was multi-cultural and expanded our membership strategically. We worked very closely with Pat Parker, who of course was Black, and we had a multi-racial group by 1974 solidly, that included Anita Oñang, who is Filipino American and Willyce Kim who is Korean American and Martha Shelly who is Jewish American and Wendy, who is also. And two or three white working class lesbians were involved, including Anne Leonard, Sharon Isabell, Paula Wallace and myself, working class white wasp people and then Joanne Garrett, who is Black, and there were young middle class white women, Karen Garrison and Jane Lawhon, fresh out of college and very supportive.<sup>188</sup>

Here Grahn highlights the ethnic and racial difference of the collective. As Hogan notes, the collective's diversity was not limited to white and black women, it also included Asian and Latina women. Interestingly, Grahn also cites the Jewish American women as a source of religious and ethnic diversity within the collective. Hogan describes ICI: A Woman's Place and the Women's Press Collective as committed to an inclusive, anti-

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<sup>188</sup> Judy Grahn quoted in Hogan 10.



racist practice in both its membership and its catalogue. In addition to the “transracial conversations within and around feminism” that “the books on the shelves...enacted,” she argues, “At ICI the racial and class diversity among the staff also provided an opportunity for productive contention.”<sup>189</sup> Hogan argues that the difficult conversations about difference among feminist bookwomen were crucial in making the movement more inclusive and highlighted the important role that diverse feminist texts played in this project.

This explains why Parker’s work was largely published by the Women’s Press Collective, Diana Press, and Firebrand Books. And Ntozake Shange who was writing poetry and her choreopoem on the West Coast in the early 1970s, was first published by Shameless Hussy Press. Lorde is an exception to this pattern as several of her poetry collections were published by WW Norton, a major press. But *The Cancer Journals* were first published, in their full length, by the lesbian feminist press Spinsters, Ink.<sup>190</sup> *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* was published by Crossing Press’s feminist series. Crossing Press, founded by the poet John Gill, was founded as New Books in 1966 and renamed in 1969. Crossing began by publishing poetry but expanded its offerings. While not explicitly feminist, Crossing was an independent press and part of the same movement in the 1970s. The press did publish a Feminist Series, which included work by Susan Griffin, Judy Grahn, Audre Lorde and others in the 1970s and 80s. The press stayed open

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<sup>189</sup> Hogan 12.

<sup>190</sup> Several of Lorde’s prose pieces, for example “The Uses of the Erotic,” were published as pamphlets by women’s presses and periodicals prior to being collected and published in *Sister Outsider* or printed in or as bound books.

after Gill passed way in 1995, but closed in 2002.<sup>191</sup> Other feminist presses of note were Persephone and Naiad. Persephone Press, which Short describes as more professional and operating on a larger scale than many other feminist presses, was founded in Massachusetts in 1976 and operated until its sudden closing in 1983. Naiad Press, which specialized in lesbian fiction, was founded in Tallahassee, Florida by the white lesbian Barbara Grier, published black lesbian Anne Allen Shockley's novel *Loving Her* and her collection of short stories, and is still operating today.<sup>192</sup>

The existence of feminist presses also enabled the printing of explicitly feminist and lesbian anthologies. As with monographs, anthologies of poetry were easier and cheaper to print than prose anthologies. Two of these anthologies, *Amazon Poetry* (Out & Out Books, 1975) and its sequel *Lesbian Poetry* (Persephone, 1981), are indicative of not only the importance of poetry to the lesbian feminist movement but also that movement's racial and ethnic inclusivity. Both volumes were edited by Joan Larkin and Elly Bulkin, Jewish lesbian poets and teachers based in New York City. Both volumes' prefatory note outlines how the editors define a lesbian poetry anthology as, "written by women who define themselves as lesbian. And who have chosen, by publishing their poetry here, to affirm publicly that identity."<sup>193</sup> The prefatory note continues, claiming that the poets and

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<sup>191</sup> "John Gill Modern Poetry Collection,"

<http://www.cpp.edu/~library/specialcollections/johngill.html>.

<sup>192</sup> "Biography and Corporate History," Barbar Grier—Naiad Press Collection Finding Aid, Gay and Lesbian Center, San Francisco Public Library,

[http://sfpl.org/pdf/libraries/main/sfhistory/GLBT/GLC30\\_Barbara\\_Grier-](http://sfpl.org/pdf/libraries/main/sfhistory/GLBT/GLC30_Barbara_Grier-Naiad_Press_Collection.pdf)

[Naiad\\_Press\\_Collection.pdf](http://sfpl.org/pdf/libraries/main/sfhistory/GLBT/GLC30_Barbara_Grier-Naiad_Press_Collection.pdf), and Paul Vitello, "Barbara Grier, Publisher of Lesbian Books, Dies at 78," *New York Times*, 13 Nov. 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/14/books/barbara-grier-publisher-of-lesbian-books-dies-at-78.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/14/books/barbara-grier-publisher-of-lesbian-books-dies-at-78.html?_r=0).

<sup>193</sup> Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, "Prefatory Note," *Amazon Poetry*, eds. Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin (New York: Out & Out Books, 1975).

their poems “belie a simple sexual definition of lesbianism. Our lives have many sides. The poetry expresses them” (XX). The following catalogue of the “many sides” of lesbian lives explicitly includes “Racism” as one such facet of lesbians’ lives reflected by the poetry in the collection. The editors also state, “[their] our belief that, while we suffer special oppression as woman-identified women within a patriarchal society, our oppression does not stop there. Our lives are further circumscribed when we do not meet other standards of contemporary American society—when we are not white or middle class or young.”<sup>194</sup> The editors also situate the contents of the collection within “a larger context of racial, economic, and social inequality.”<sup>195</sup> They center lesbian poets while simultaneously acknowledging the other identities and experiences that shape these women’s lives.

The first version of the anthology *Amazon Poetry* included two black women, Parker and Lorde, and the Asian American poet Willyce Kim. The rest of the contributors were white, although it is worth noting that a number were Jewish. *Lesbian Poetry* published six years later contains the same epigraph and prefatory note, affirming the editors’ continued commitment to including a variety of viewpoints and identities under the rubric of lesbian poetry, but it is significantly expanded both in the total number of poems and in the number of poets featured. In addition to Parker and Lorde, a number of new women of color poets were added: Becky Birtha, Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Barbara Smith, Michelle Cliff, Cheryl Clarke, Sapphire, Barbara Noda, Kitty Tsui, Osa Hidalgo-de la Riva, and Donna Allegra. This increase in representation in the anthology

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<sup>194</sup> *ibid*

<sup>195</sup> *ibid*

marks an increase of lesbian poets publishing in general from the early years of feminist publishing in the mid-1970s through to the early 1980s. In the introduction to *Lesbian Poetry*, Bulkin references this paradigmatic shift. She writes,

A slender volume (112 pages and 38 poets) compared to *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology*, *Amazon Poetry* appeared at a time that now seems long ago in terms of lesbian publishing; Violet press was putting out its first two perfect-bound (as opposed to stapled) books of lesbian poetry; the Women's Press Collective and Diana Press were publishing frequently, prior to their merger and eventual folding; *Amazon Quarterly*, then the one widely distributed lesbian literary magazine, had just put out its final issue; and none of today's lesbian-feminist literary magazines—*Azalea*, *Conditions*, *Feminary*, *Sinister Wisdom*—had begun to appear.<sup>196</sup>

Here Bulkin identifies a shift in publishing capacity (“perfect-bound [as opposed to hand-stapled] books”), a change in eras, as two major presses from 1975 were defunct by 1981, and an increase in the number of outlets for lesbian feminist writing in the six years between the publication of *Amazon Poetry* and *Lesbian Poetry*. Although the Women's Press Collective, which had merged with Diana Press, had closed in 1978, by 1981 other feminist presses had emerged. These presses, including Persephone Press, which published *Lesbian Poetry*, carried much larger catalogues than their predecessors, and were capable of publishing a variety of forms, including novels and longer volumes, like the almost 300-page anthology.

Both anthologies contain lists of the contributors' works and a list of feminist presses that publish their works. In *Lesbian Poetry*, this list is divided into sections

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<sup>196</sup> Elly Bulkin, “Introduction: A Look at Lesbian Poetry” in *Lesbian Poetry: An Anthology*, eds. Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981), xxx.

according to the type of publication (poetry, prose, etc.) and includes ordering information. Thus the backmatter of the anthology, like other collections produced by feminist presses, self-consciously situated itself within a network of feminist publishers by enabling readers to discover and procure additional works by its contributors and their interlocutors. The length of the backmatter in *Lesbian Poetry*, almost twenty pages, reflects the growth of feminist and lesbian publishing and writing. And the addition of an essay on “Lesbian Poetry in the Classroom” by Bulkin points to the increasing institutionalization of women’s studies in the university, as I will discuss in chapter 3.

The differences between *Amazon Poetry* and *Lesbian Poetry* are also indicative of the increasing visibility of lesbians of color. For example, in the six years between the publication of the two anthologies a number of new publications were founded for and by lesbian feminists, including the third world women-centered *Azalea*. During this time women of color, especially black women, had successfully campaigned for the inclusion of more women of color in feminist publications, resulting in a series of special issues devoted to race and racism as issues within the feminist movement, notably *Conditions: Five, the Black Women’s Issue* in 1979. By 1981, not coincidentally the year that the Third World Women focused publisher Kitchen Table Press was founded, women of color were creating their own autonomous institutions for their particular feminism, as I will discuss in detail in chapter 4. It is within this increasingly inter- and multi-racial lesbian feminist movement that Lorde and Parker emerged as popular poets.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> White lesbian were important allies in the struggle to include and promote the voices of women of color within feminist publishing circles. Bulkin and Larkin, who were white,

Although each woman was born in different parts of the country and in fact conducted the bulk of her career as a poet on the opposite coast as the other, Lorde and Parker moved within similar political and social circles and, after meeting in 1969, became close friends, who corresponded until Parker's death in 1989. Their lives and work straddled multiple movements in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Their poetry is innately intersectional and explores themes of race, gender, and sexuality, chronicling each poet's struggle to reckon with her multiple identities and anti-racist, feminist politics. Thus I position Lorde and Parker as working within and at the origins of Third World and Black Feminisms. They are both a part of the early generation of lesbian poets, as Linda Garber and Julie Enzser have argued,<sup>198</sup> and the first generation of black feminist poets allying themselves with feminism rather than black nationalism, distinguishing them from Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks and Sonia Sanchez. During the 1970s and 80s, Lorde and Parker's work is enacted and created not only a woman of color feminist theory, but also

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purposefully included third world women's voices in their anthologies. In 1981, Bulkin wrote a letter to the editor to the lesbian newsletter *off our backs* in protest of a review of Lilian Faderman's book *Surpassing the Love of Men* critiquing the publication's decision to review Faderman's book and the reviewer's failure to comment on the "complete absence of lesbians of color" from the text. In her letter, Bulkin catalogues a list of historical and contemporary lesbian women of color, in particular black lesbians, whom Faderman could have included in her study. She goes on to express her disappointment that despite "*oob's* commitment to confronting racism...a member of the collective didn't automatically consider what was left out—and the implications of that omission as well as what was included." Bulkin finishes by exhorting *oob* and other lesbian feminists to do better: "As writers or reviewers, those of us who are white need to stop perpetuating the invisibility of lesbians of color." *off our backs* 11.9, October 1981.

<sup>198</sup> Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Julie Enzser, "The Whole Naked Truths of Our Lives: Lesbian-Feminist Print Culture from 1969 through 1989" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2013).

ways of relating to and transforming what Francis Beale in 1970 called the “*white* woman’s movement.”<sup>199</sup>

*Pat Parker: The Goat Child*

Parker, born and raised in Texas, was the youngest of five children—four girls, one boy—in a working-class black family. She left Texas at the age of 17 when she traveled to California for college. After arriving in California she married twice. First in 1962 to Black Arts Movement playwright and Black Panther activist Ed Bullins and then, after their divorce, to a white man Robert F. Parker, an amateur poet and accountant. They divorced in 1966. Parker had two children Cassidy, whom she co-parented with Laura Brown, and Anastasia, nicknamed “Stasia,” whom she adopted with her partner Marty Dunham in 1984. Parker did not come out as a lesbian until the late 1960s. During her life, she was active in the lesbian feminist community in Oakland, CA, as one of the founding members of the Women’s Press Collective and through her work at Oakland’s Feminist Women’s Health Center. She published only five collections of poetry during her career *Child of Myself* (1972), *Pit Stop* (1973), *Womanslaughter* (1978), *Movement in Black* (1978), and *Jonestown and Other Madness* (1985) but her work was published widely in a variety of black and feminist magazines and journals, as well as in several feminist anthologies. Although she never achieved quite the same notoriety as Lorde in

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<sup>199</sup> Frances Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: New American Library, 1970), 90-100.

feminist or poetry circles, she traveled and performed throughout the United States. Over the course of her career, Parker read at many of the early feminist bookstores Hogan studies, including Old Wives' Tale (San Francisco, CA), A Woman's Place (Oakland, CA), and Labyris (NYC).

Parker's style of poetry drew heavily on the Black Arts tradition and aesthetic, even if it eschewed its political tenets. Her work, with its rhythmic phrasing was solidly situated within the black oral tradition. Judy Grahn recalls Parker's response when she asked her about her poetic influences,

She handed me a small pile of paperbound books by poets, all of them Black, two thirds of them women...I noticed that a number of the books were produced by independent Black presses, especially Dudley Randall's Broadside Press in Detroit, and the Third World Press from Chicago, extremely important sources of contemporary Black writing.<sup>200</sup>

Parker was likely reading the work of black women poets Giovanni, Sanchez, and Brooks. She was reading BAM poets and engaging with their work as much as, if not more than, that of feminist and lesbian poets. Elsewhere Parker cited Grahn's *Common Women* poems as one of her influences. Thus her work's aesthetic and political commitments exist at the intersection of two overlapping independent press movements taking place in very different contexts and in different parts of the country. The form and

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<sup>200</sup> Judy Grahn, "Introduction." In Pat Parker, *Movement in Black: The Collected Poetry of Pat Parker, 1961-1978*, 11-15. 1978 (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing, 1983), 12-13.



themes of her poetry merge the concerns of both movements, often depicting anti-racism and feminism as intertwined.

Parker's first collection *Child of Myself*, first published by Shameless Hussy Press and then re-issued in its second printing by the Women's Press Collective, explores a range of issues and themes related to her life as a black lesbian feminist woman and her recent coming out. The opening poem "from cavities of bones," from which the collection's title is drawn, describes Parker's coming to consciousness as a lesbian and a feminist. Similar to Alexis Pauline Gumbs's argument in her dissertation<sup>201</sup> on black feminist writing and activism, here Parker re-imagines genealogy and her relationship to her parents:

i, woman, i  
can no longer claim  
a mother of flesh  
a father of marrow  
I, Woman, must be  
the child of myself.

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<sup>201</sup> Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism 1968-1996," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010).

Parker signifies on the biblical story of creation, part of which she selects for the poem's epigraph.<sup>202</sup> She assumes the persona of Eve, transforming her life story into myth. Eve, the first woman, intended "to think second/ to believe first" has rejected that subordinate relationship to man, "a mistake/ erased by the motion of years." She has decided to remake herself and be the arbiter of her own destiny. In coming out and embracing her lesbian identity, Parker is re-born and becomes her own child. This opening poem sets the tone for the collection, which meditates on Parker's failed marriages, her childhood, and her newly realized lesbian identity.

The subsequent seven poems in the collection—"Brother," "Sometimes my husband," "Fuller Brush Day," "Fuller Brush 2," "to see a man cry," "You can't be sure of anything these days," and "Exodus (to my husbands, lovers)"—critique and reject heterosexism and patriarchy. In "Brother," Parker responds to a black man, using the familial language of racial solidarity "brother," who claims "my [her] real enemy/ is the system." The first five lines outline quote the statement and preface the rejection that comes in the second half of the poem: "i'm no genius,/ but i do know/ that system/ you hit me with/ is call/a fist." In this poem, Parker rejects the misogyny that characterized the Black Arts Movement's ideology and aesthetics and references the physical harm of domestic violence, perhaps also referencing her marriage to Ed Bullins, a member of the Black Panthers, whom she suggested had been physically abusive during their marriage.<sup>203</sup> The epigraph, a Harriet Tubman quote, frames the poem as a piece of

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<sup>202</sup> "This at last is bone of bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Genesis I; 23.

<sup>203</sup> Anita Cornwell, "Pat Parker Poet from San Francisco," *Hera*, Summer 1975, 40-41.

defiant, revolutionary speech and troubles the sharp division between racism and sexism. “Sometimes my husband” and both “Fuller Brush” poems lament the unending, drudgery of housework and her past acceptance of the role of homemaker, a common theme of second-wave feminist writings. Both poems end with a revelation—“...tomorrow I am going to lose/ my temper -/ I will destroy all the dishes/ that i missed last week —”; “& I bought it”—explicitly calling into question the legitimacy of heteropatriarchal roles. “to see a man cry” and “You can’t be sure of anything these days” build upon this critique, exploring the limitations of emotional connection within a heterosexist framework and lamenting the inability of even seemingly independent, liberal, politically radical men to reject heteropatriarchal domestic roles within a relationship.

“Exodus,” like the opening poem “from cavities...”, signifies on biblical imagery, this time drawing on the Hebrews escape from slavery in Egypt and their generations-long trek through the desert. The poem uses domestic imagery, specifically the marital bed, as a metonym for heteronormative marriage: “Trust me no more -/ Our bed is unsafe./ Hidden within folds of cloth/ a cancerous rage —” The autobiographical speaker states “i will serve you no more” and calls herself a “desperate slave.” Again, Parker as the speaker assumes a biblical persona, this time that of a Jewish slave. In doing so, she casts her husband as a despotic ruler. At the close of the poem, she “Ris[es] from folds of cloth —”; she leaves the marital bed, the space of heteronormative home, for good. The poem is Parker’s declaration of war, ending the opening section of the collection, and, simultaneously, Parker’s identity before coming out as a lesbian. “Exodus,” like

“cavities...” marks the end of her former, heterosexual life and announces her new beginning.

The rest of the collection contains poems condemning police violence, reminiscing on the life of the child Parker gave up for adoption, her family history, and her coming of age. The longest poem, “Goat Child,” is explicitly autobiographical as each section is sub-titled as a portion of Parker’s life (e.g. 1944-1956 and 1962-1966). The first two sections of the poem recount Parker’s childhood in Texas including her difficulties as a child who refused to conform to gender norms and her family’s struggles with poverty. The character of “the goat child,” appears repeatedly as the embodiment of her wildness, her non-normativity. The third and fourth sections of the poem span the years of Parker’s two marriages. These two sections introduce the figure of “the buddha,” a male seer who stands in for her two husbands, promising to show her “the ways of woman.” The poem ends with the buddha’s departure and the goat child’s death: “the goat – child died/ & a woman was born.” The ending of “Goat Child” echoes “from cavities...”, emphasizing how Parker’s relatively recent coming out has resulted in a rebirth.

The final six poems in the collection are all about romantic and sexual relationships between women. *Child of Myself* struggles to reconcile Parker’s newfound lesbian identity, her frustration with heteropatriarchy, and her anti-racist politics. These issues are, for the most part, relegated to individual poems rather than interwoven within an individual work. The poems in Parker’s second collection, *Pit Stop*, published just one year after *Child of Myself*, merge her anti-racist and lesbian-feminist politics throughout.

In addition to the titular poem which explores Parker's issues with alcohol, *Pit Stop* contains works about her lovers, U.S. politics, and, similar to *Child of Myself*, her relationship with her parents. This collection contains several of Parker's most well known poems, specifically "have you ever tried to hide?" and "my lover is a woman." "my lover is a woman," the first poem in the collection, explores the ways in which the speaker's romantic relationship with a white woman exposes her to both racism and homophobia. Because Parker had several long-term romantic relationships with white women, it can be safely assumed that "my lover is a woman," like much of Parker's work, is autobiographical. The poem is divided into four sections, each made up of two stanzas. The first stanzas in each section describe the speaker's lover—that she "is a woman", her "hair is blonde", her "eyes are blue"—and then connects these physical features to emotional comfort and security. In the first three sections, the description is linked by an ampersand to an interaction and/or emotional closeness that makes the speaker "feel good – feel safe."

The tone of emotional comfort and security in the first stanzas is contrasted by the anxiety and danger manifest in the second stanzas. Each of the second stanzas opens with "then—I never think of..." signaling an abrupt shift from positive to negative emotions. This shift to negative emotions is characterized by a series of racist, homophobic, or otherwise threatening incidents. Each of these negative stanzas ends with different iterations of the refrain "never hear my mother cry/ Lord what kind of child is this?" The loving relationship described in the first stanzas of each section insulates Parker from the painful realities described in the second stanzas. When she is with her lover, she "never

think[s] of” these negative experiences, for example “...the little boy/ who spat & called [her] nigger” or “[her] sisters say -/ bulldaggers, queers, funny -/ come see us but don’t/ bring your friends”.

The clean separation of these two realms is disrupted in the fourth section of poem:

And when we go to a gay bar  
& my people shun me because I crossed  
the line  
& her people look to see what’s  
wrong with her – what defect  
drove her to me –

And when we walk the streets  
of this city – forget and touch  
or hold hands and the people  
stare, glare, frown, & taunt  
at those queers -

The sexism and racism of the outside world do eventually invade Parker’s romantic relationship when she and her lover encounter prejudice because they are in a same-sex interracial relationship. Each of these painful encounters with prejudice cause Parker to recall all of the traumas she has experienced as a queer black woman:

I remember –  
Every word taught me  
Every word said to me  
Every deed done to me  
& then I hate -  
I look at my lover  
& for an instance – doubt –

The force of these negative memories is so great that it causes her to question her relationship. But Parker's relationship survives the onslaught from the outside world and she resolves to "hold her [lover's] hand tighter." The poem concludes with one last repetition of the "Lord what kind of child is this?" refrain. But this time the "never" is deleted so that Parker's mother's disapproval is present and palpable instead of silenced.

Despite the eventual encroachment of prejudice and pain into the relationship that had previously shielded Parker from the pernicious effects of homophobia and racism, the poem is still optimistic about the possibility for and power of interracial relationships. The ending certainly troubles the utopian image that Parker has painted of her relationship as a safe harbor from the dangers of the outside world but it still validates it as a means she uses to survive in spite of the intolerance of the world around her. In a surprising and radical move, here Parker not only portrays interracial intimacy as not only possible but, at least in this case, potentially beneficial for those involved. Parker and her partner's love for each other embodies the anti-racist ethos of Parker's personal politics,

weaving together her identities as a black queer woman within a single poem. At the same time, “my lover is a woman,” gestures towards the difficulties Parker experiences in her daily life as a result of her intersectional identity as a queer black woman, highlighting how she experiences harassment within and from both the black and the (predominantly white) lesbian communities.

Although Parker was a part of an ethnically diverse feminist community in Oakland, including the women she worked with at the Women’s Press Collective, she was still often frustrated, and sometimes hurt, by white women’s attitudes and behavior. This frustration is the subject of one of her most well-known poems, which also appears in *Pit Stop*. In “have you ever tried to hide,” Parker describes the experience of being rendered invisible in a feminist group dominated by white women. The epigraph to the poem—“How do we know that the Panther will accept a gift from white middle-class women?”—ignores Parker’s presence and participation in the group as a black woman and effectively invalidates her contribution to and involvement in their work; the poem is in response to this statement. The bulk of the poem describes the emotional experience of being thus dismissed:

Have you ever tried to hide?  
in a group  
of women  
hide  
yourself  
slide between floorboards



slide yourself away, child,  
away from this room  
& your sister  
before she notices  
your Black self &  
her white mind

The shape of the poem echoes the sliding feeling it describes. The poem's second person address asks the audience to imagine how it would feel to be erased in this way. Parker uses empathy to communicate her critique and make the pain she has suffered legible to others. Parker invokes the feminist concept of sisterhood in order to highlight the differences between women that it obscures. Her "Black self" and the other woman's "white mind" metonymically stand in for the constellation of racialized experiences and beliefs that distinguish them from each other.

The last two lines of the poem forcefully summarize the critique that has previously only been expressed as pain: "SISTER! Your foot is smaller/ but it's still on my neck." The "foot on [her] neck" here represents the oppression Parker feels within the women's movement. It is "smaller" because the oppression she is capable of enacting is not as significant than that that other, more privileged individuals, like white men, can impose; "but," as the oppression and mistreatment white women are capable of is still harmful and must be checked. The confrontational exclamation in the poem's final two lines, again invokes the term sister ironically in order to simultaneously critique the assumed, fundamental bond between women within feminist activist communities and to

call upon the audience to live up to the standards implied by it. “have you ever tried?” condemns the mistreatment of black women by white women within feminist activist groups, but also calls for better interracial relationships between black and white women, and does not foreclose the possibility of them.

Some of Parker’s closest friends, specifically the poet Judy Grahn<sup>204</sup> and Bernice Fladen (who Parker called by her nickname “Whitey”), were white. Race does not seem to have been a major issue in these friendships and is not mentioned in their correspondence. But Parker did write about a desire to have relationships with other women of color. Her poem “gente” describes her joy at being a member of softball team with other third world women. Although she often read with Grahn, she also shared billings with other third world women poets, like the Asian-American poet Willyce Kim and Native American poet Chrystos, who were also her lovers at times. But, for the most part, Parker was the only black woman, if not the only woman of color, in feminist spaces. Her feelings of isolation were especially apparent during her 1975 reading tour.

By the time Pat Parker went on her first cross-country reading tour in 1975, a year before the first Women in Print Conference, a national network of feminist bookwomen—reading groups, bookstores, and presses—had already been established. The tour, organized by Grahn and Parker’s lover at the time, Ann Breshares, criss-crossed the United States, with stops in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., Houston,

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<sup>204</sup> Grahn’s *Edward the Dyke* and *Common Woman* established her as an early lesbian literary star, if such a thing can be said to exist. Grahn and Parker worked together in the Women’s Press Collective, often performed together, and recordings of their poetry were released by the women’s music label Olivia Records in 1976 as a two-sided record “Where Would I Be Without You?”

Cincinnati, New Haven, Albuquerque, San Diego, Boston, St. Louis, Denver, Columbus, and Phoenix. The tour lasted for about six weeks, beginning and ending on the West Coast. Parker read at women's centers, feminist bookstores, and even in interested women's homes. She mobilized her network of contacts, including women's presses, to arrange for readings, where she was able to sell her books of poetry, and, it seems, for lodging at least during some points during the tour.<sup>205</sup> The tour, and Parker's descriptions of her experiences during it, are illustrative both of the importance of feminist networks to the proliferation of women's poetry and the livelihood of those poets and the difficulties black women poets, like Parker, experienced as often the only nonwhite women in these spaces.

Parker describes racist incidents and uncomfortable reminders of racial differences during the tour in a series of letters to Willie Coleman, a black woman with whom Parker had a longtime correspondence. In San Diego, Parker writes, she "Read in a women's coffeehouse. There was one third world woman in the place – me. And that was pretty much the way it was throughout the trip."<sup>206</sup> Although Parker praises the "Fantastic women's community" in Albuquerque and writes that she enjoyed her readings in other cities, especially D.C., she also recounts uncomfortable moments. In addition to a repeated complaint about vegetarianism among the white lesbians she stayed with during

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<sup>205</sup> In 1974, Lorde wrote Parker a letter in which she suggested Parker "get the names of women's groups and bookshops here [on the East Coast]...and send some kind of letter to them." Lorde understood the importance of the feminist network to not only supporting a literary tour but actually to making it possible. (See Pat Parker Papers, Box 5, Folder 1) Seemingly in response to Lorde's advice, Parker's archives contain over a dozen letters to feminist groups, university departments, bookstores, and other organizations listing her publications, qualifications, and inquiring about the possibility of doing a reading during her 1975 tour. (See Pat Parker Papers, Box 16, Folder 21).

<sup>206</sup> Parker to Coleman, June 13, 1975, Pat Parker Papers, Box 2, Folder 18, Schlesinger Library.

her tour,<sup>207</sup> Parker sometimes encountered racial hostility. In Denver, when she and Ann went out to eat dinner, she was accosted by a racist patron. She writes,

One of the customers there got upset that Ann, a white woman, was sitting there with me. He proceeded to rave about how she was a disgrace to her race, worse than a prostitute, a slut etc. then he started in on me. He said if he had me in Louisiana he would run me over with a Cadillac. It took a lot of restraint not to laugh at that one. I kept thinking that I was supposed to be the one with the Cadillac. Then he said I would be hung. Then he asked me to come outside and fight. All this time the other customers are sitting and watching this scene. The waitress, a woman about 60 or 65 was standing in between me and this dude. He's shoving her and she's shoving him. Meanwhile I'm thinking of what would happen if I fired on this dude. Thoughts like all the other acquiescing folk might decide to aid their fellow man, or that the Denver police would arrive and tow me away; and at the same time keeping Ann still who by this time had picked up her dinner knife and wants to defend our rights. Lord bless Denver.

There seems to be a mix of homophobia and racism in this incident, but the racist statements seem to be most worrisome to Parker. Even though she describes the altercation with a dark sense of humor, she realizes that being a black woman in public with a white woman, as she also describes in "my lover is a woman," is potentially dangerous. Outside of the socially liberal, politically radical community of Oakland, Parker is even more exposed. Even in 1975, Parker feared being the victim of violence as a result of her race and sexuality, and actually even more so because she is *both* black and a lesbian.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Parker did not particularly like vegetarians. She was frustrated by having to find other places to eat when her hosts did not eat meat and later would write a poem, "To My Vegetarian Friend" that linked "soul food" and meat to her racial identity.

<sup>208</sup> Parker describes being the victim of repeated vandalism in both 1975, when she experience a series of flat tires, and later in the 1980s when her home with Marty Dunham was repeatedly

The incident was made worse by the reaction of the local lesbians: “Then later as we related this story to some of the women in the community they proceed to tell us about some guy not liking them because they were dykes and how they dumped ice cream on his head; and Ann now getting upset again because they can’t see the difference in the situation.”<sup>209</sup> The local lesbian women are unable to see how Parker’s experience as a black lesbian is qualitatively different from theirs as white lesbians. The false equivalence of racism and homophobia was a frustration to Parker and other black feminists. Lorde describes it in *Zami*, writing that her white friends “seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood.”<sup>210</sup> Her friend and lover Muriel, a white woman, went so far as to say ““We’re all niggers”” a statement Lorde described as “wishful thinking based on little fact.”<sup>211</sup> What might have been an attempt to connect, ends up erasing the unique struggles of black women.

Another incident in Baltimore, points to how difficult it was for black and white women to build alliances across their differences. Parker did not do a reading in Baltimore, but traveled there to “just visit the women from Diana Press,” who would publish her third collection *Womanslaughter*. While there, Parker “Felt a strong class difference.” Parker and her lover wanted to buy some clothing and found themselves in a minor conflict with one of the white women from Diana Press when they indicated that they did not want to shop at a second hand store. In a letter to Lorde, Parker writes,

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robbed and vandalized. (Parker to Lorde, July 24, 1975, Box 5, Folder 1, Pat Parker Papers, Schlesinger Library).

<sup>209</sup> *ibid*

<sup>210</sup> Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1982), 203.

<sup>211</sup> *ibid*

I got uptight cause I can't relate to someone telling me about working class and middle class and how much better one is than the other. After spending my first 17 years in second hand clothes I have no desire to continue. I think that's one of the primary differences that turn third world women off of the women's movement. The white women are running around talking about how bad it is to be a housewife and stay home and third world women are trying to get there.

The white woman from Diana Press seems to think that secondhand clothes are somehow ethically or morally preferable to new clothes, perhaps because, as Parker suggests, was never forced by poverty to only wear secondhand clothing. The class differences that Parker highlights manifest and overlap with racial difference. Parker views this conflict as representative of larger problems around difference within the women's movement.

The absence of third world women in the audiences of Parker's shows was an issue throughout the tour. Of her visit to Cincinnati Parker wrote, "Small reading and people apologizing for the lack of third world women. I think before I go on tour again, I'm going to write a year in advance so those women can comb the Black communities. Some of them almost had me in tears."<sup>212</sup> Even though she very much enjoyed her reading in St. Louis writing, that it was "Fantastic. Really fine audience I got off and read my heart out," she noted, "the lack of third world women still existed."<sup>213</sup>

This pattern of all white audiences was broken in D.C. where Parker did two readings, one at a club and another informal reading at a woman's house. At the reading

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<sup>212</sup> Parker to Lorde, July 25, 1975. Pat Parker Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>213</sup> *ibid.*

at the house, “the audience was 75% black.”<sup>214</sup> Parker was overjoyed at this development. She writes, “Oh how sweet it was. Wanted to spread my body over the entire room and touch every one of those sisters. In fact the whole city of Washington just kept me high.”<sup>215</sup> Although Parker was used to reading to white audiences, sharing space with other black women gave her great pleasure.

Usually Parker attempted to make the best of reading to all or mostly white crowds. She described her reading in her hometown of Houston as “fun.” She writes to Coleman, “I read all my poems about what a shitty place that was to grow up in to all those white women who were probably making it shitty when we were kids.” Parker views her readings as an opportunity to educate white women in the audience and as a therapeutic exercise for herself. This seems typical of Parker’s readings. They were an opportunity to challenge white feminists who came out to see her. One can imagine that her reading of “have you ever tried to hide,” must have been especially striking to white women given what others have described as impressive skills as a performer. “[H]er deep, resonant, seductive voice” and her imposing physical stature animated Parker’s already powerful words, amplifying the power of the critique and the intensity of the emotions in her poems.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Parker to Lorde, July 25, 1975. Pat Parker Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>215</sup> *ibid*; In 1975, Washington, D.C. was still a “chocolate city,” with a large African American population. Thus it is likely that Parker enjoyed the city so much because she was surrounded by other people of color, both at this second reading and in the city in general, which was not necessarily the case at other stops on the tour.

<sup>216</sup> Donna Allegra, in *An Expanded Edition of Movement in Black* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1999), 26.

The reading in Houston was also attended by a “Black woman reporter...from one of the Black radio stations.” The reporter spent most of the interview “about 4 ft. away [from Parker] and was holding the mike [sic] out in front of her like a shield.” Parker concludes, “I’m sure that sister thought she was gonna get seduced or attacked by the ferocious dyke.” She continues, “She asked the usual questions about Blacks and the women’s movement. Then she asked me what I thought about Joann Little and seemed shocked that I knew about the case guess she didn’t know that dykes read newspapers too.” Here Parker makes light of the homophobia she encounters from other black people and notes the intersectionality of her politics. Even if it is not apparent to the journalist it seems obvious to Parker that she, as a black lesbian feminist, would be following the Joann Little case. After all Little, a black woman, was being tried for the murder of a white prison guard who had been sexually assaulting her. Parker’s anti-racist and feminist political views converged in such a case and, indeed, the case brought civil rights and feminist activists together.<sup>217</sup> Parker refused to limit her alliances or deny parts of her identity, even though her commitment to anti-racism was not shared by all of her colleagues in the women’s movement.

Even though she experienced racism within the women’s movement, Parker was committed to it. In a letter to Coleman in 1975 she answered Coleman’s query as to why she continued to attempt to bridge the differences between her and white women thusly:

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<sup>217</sup> See Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil rights Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).



Now, ‘Why am I using so much energy making these women understand my life?’ I know for myself I have to; it is important for me to deal with all my oppressions. I can’t really free one part of myself without the other. I’m not going to work for Black liberation and then have to fight the brothers and sisters because I’m a feminist and a dyke. I’m not going to fight for women’s liberation and then fight the sisters because ‘m Black and a Dyke. I’m not going to fight for Gay liberation and then have to fight dykes and faggots because I’m Black and a woman. Gonna either have to get peoples’ understanding together or give up on people. I’m not ready to do that.

As for compromise – I don’t know that i’m making them. The one thing i don’t want to do is to decide to compromise my truth so that I can be acce[p]ted in the world we got. I’ve had a number of Black writers and people say I should not mentioned [sic] being a lesbian. I would gain greater acceptance in the community and sell more books and make more money. That’s the sort of compromise I cannot afford to make.<sup>218</sup>

Parker refused to suppress any aspect of her identity as a black lesbian feminist woman, even for economic gain. She refuses to “compromise [her] truth that she [she] can be accepted in the world.” Her insistence on maintaining the full, complexity of herself and her politics often resulted in frustration. For example, during the 1975 tour Parker gave an extended interview to a reporter from the radical feminist newspaper *off our backs* during her time in Washington, D.C. Despite talking for over three hours, the reporter “comes over the next day with a page and a half of copy. I spent a great deal of time talking about racism we had encountered both in and out of the women’s community. No mention.” The writer ignored a subject that Parker believed was important and instead included Parker’s complaints about a frustrating payment policy in a local club.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Parker to Coleman, June 13, 1975. Pat Parker Papers, Box 2, Folder 18, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>219</sup> Although Parker asked the journalist to excise the name of the club, to avoid controversy, in the end the name of the venue remained in the story. This incident led Parker to comment in a letter to Lorde, “New lesson for the kid – Beware of interviews.”

The poems in Parker's third collection *Womanslaughter* continued to illustrate and interweave her black lesbian identity with her anti-racist and feminist politics. *Womanslaughter* contains several poems that are explicitly about whiteness and racial difference. Both "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend" and "To my vegetarian friend" address the potential pitfalls of interracial friendship. In "for the white person..." Parker lays out instructions for navigating the complexities of cross-racial friendship. The poem begins, "The first thing you need to do is forget that i'm Black./ Second, you must never that i'm Black". Parker immediately sets up a double-bind that acknowledges the difficulties of addressing matters of race in cross-racial friendships. The contradiction outlined in the opening couplet is echoed in the succeeding stanzas, which instruct the poem's audience, the potential white friend, to constantly be aware of race without making problematic racist assumptions about or statements to Parker. Although all the examples are humorous—at one point, Parker writes that she will consider "charging stud feeds" if her friends tell her they "believe Blacks are better lovers than whites"—they address actual, harmful racial microaggressions that black people experience on a regular basis.

The final stanza summarizes the message relayed by the previous ones in the same casual tone: "In other words, if you really want to be my/ friend—don't make a labor of it. I'm lazy./ Remember." Here Parker requests that her white friends avoid these racist missteps because dealing with such missteps is "labor" for her. A successful, mutually beneficial friendship would not require this type of unpleasant work. When she claims, "I am lazy," Parker injects humor into the final stanza. Her claim of laziness

deflects responsibility for the difficulty of maintaining interracial friendships away from the white friend. Parker calls for increased awareness and sensitivity on the part of her white friends but is careful not to alienate them completely. Her serious message is couched in humorous language that softens the critique and renders it less confrontational.

“To my vegetarian friend” is addressed to a friend of Parker’s who has maligned her traditional, Southern, Black food. Given Parker’s repeated complaints about the vegetarians in the women’s community she met and stayed with during her tour and the linking of “soul food” to her racial identity, this poem can also be read as a commentary on racial and class differences within the feminist community. In response to her friend’s comments, Parker outlines the cultural and spiritual importance of this type of food to her and other Black people in the United States: “It’s not called soul food/ because it goes with music./ It is a survival food.” Parker goes on to describe the history of Black people’s relationship to food in the United States, pointing to the survival of slaves who were forced to subsist on meager rations. Parker locates herself in a long line of Black people who have struggled to survive in a profoundly racist country that would deny them their humanity. This food and the act of eating it is actually a way for her to connect herself to this history: “it is a ritual/ it is a joining/ me to my ancestors.” She continues to refute her friend’s negative appraisal of her food by explaining the spiritual importance of this type of sustenance: “this food is good for me/ it replenishes my soul.” For Parker, who grew up poor in the segregated South, soul food is more than just food. It is a cultural retention that nourishes her both physically and spiritually. The poem, then, is

both a meditation on black culture and an educational piece for a white audience that may be ignorant of black history and foodways.

*Womanslaughter* also contains poems that explicitly address the challenges of “sisterhood” between women. For example, the poem “gente,” which is about the third world women’s softball team that Parker played on, contrasts her positive experiences with nonwhite women with her sometimes negative feelings about interacting with white women with the “good feeling” of being a part of a group of nonwhite women:

it feels good  
to be able to say  
my sisters  
and not have  
*any* reservations

The shared experience of racial difference—that allows Parker “to sit and be loose/ to talk, without worry,/ about the racist in the room” and “...say/ ‘Have you ever felt like...?/ and somebody has.”—is what makes Parker feel “good.” The emotional and political connections among women of color are not troubled by the same pitfalls as those with white women, even other feminists.

Another poem in the collection, “there is a woman in this town,” also troubles the fiction of universal sisterhood. The poem’s two, linked refrains—“there is a woman in this town” and “Is she is our sister?”—frame a series of seven vignettes depicting

different women, ranging from a housewife to a drug addict. The poem ends with the same question, which it never answers. Instead, the audience is tasked with parsing the issue. Can women this different have shared political goals? Can they work together? At times, Parker seems to have been optimistic about this question. But in an untitled and undated speech draft she revealed, "...unfortunately I had to come to the realization that every woman is not my sister."<sup>220</sup> "gente" and "there is a woman in this town." like much of Parker's work, interrogate how racial difference and sameness shape women's relationships to one another.

The final, titular poem in *Womanslaughter* is also the longest. In it Parker wrote about the murder of her sister Shirley, who was killed by her ex-husband. Of her three sisters, Parker was closest to Shirley. It was Shirley who first brought her to California and "gave her much needed love and support."<sup>221</sup> According to Parker it took her three years to get over her sister's death enough to write about what happened. It is still difficult for her to read the poem in public because the hurt went so deep."<sup>222</sup> "Womanslaughter," links the death of Shirley and Parker's father, Buster Cooks, which were only five months apart. It describes the aftermaths of both deaths and the trial of Shirley's murderer, "the quiet man." Featuring repeated, chant-like refrains that often appeared in Parker's work, the poem mourns the loss of Shirley and the inaction of the police and legal system that both failed to protect her and to adequately punish her killer, who was sentenced to just one year of jail time with work release.

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<sup>220</sup> Untitled in Box 13, Folder 14, Pat Parker Papers, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>221</sup> Parker, Author's Note for *Diana Press, Inc.*, Box 3, Folder 9, Pat Parker Papers, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>222</sup> *ibid*

The poem is divided into five sections: the opening stanza, section I: An Act, section II: Justice, section III: Somebody's Trial, and section IV: Woman-slaughter. The first stanza describes how Parker has come to terms with her sister's death so that "It doesn't hurt as much now." The subsequent sections detail how Parker found out about her sister's death, linking it to her father's death and funeral; the escalation of violence on the part of Shirley's ex-husband; and the murderer's trial. The final section bemoans the state of affairs that has led to the banality of violence against women: "Sister, I do not understand/ I rage and do not understand.../Was his crime so slight?" The poem continues, outlining the disturbing discourse surrounding domestic violence:

What was his crime?  
He only killed his wife.  
But a divorce is say.  
Not final, they say.  
Her things were his,  
including her life.  
Men cannot rape their wives.  
Men cannot kill their wives.  
They passion them to death

Using a mode of address that simultaneously conjures her slain sister and her political "sisters" in the women's movement, Parker critiques the patriarchal assumptions that authorize these disturbing claims. The final stanza articulates Parker's determination to fight for women's rights and safety:

I have gained many sisters  
And if one is beaten,  
or raped, or killed,  
I will not come in mourning black.  
I will not celebrate her death  
and it will matter not  
if she's Black or white  
if she loves women or men.  
I will come with my many sisters  
and decorate the streets  
with the innards of those  
brothers in womanslaughter.  
No more can I dull my rage  
in alcohol and deference  
to men's courts.  
I will come to my sisters,  
not dutiful.  
I will come strong.

The speaker, Parker, pledges to defend other women, including her remaining biological sisters, her close friends and "sisters" within the movement, as well as all women as indicated by the political usage of the term "sisters," from violence. If they are harmed or even killed, she vows to avenge them with violence, having rejected the type of justice meted out by "men's courts" and the impotence of her repressed rage and grief. Her

commitment to “come strong,” is one to honor and avenge the rights of women everywhere. The final stanza also highlights the word play of the poem’s title, where “womanslaughter” replaces “manslaughter”—the crime Shirley’s killer was convicted of—because only the murder of a woman can be deemed “not” a murder. Although it did not appear in a collection until 1978, in 1976, Parker was invited to Brussels to read the poem as part of the International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women.

Parker’s fourth collection, *Movement in Black: the collected poetry of Pat Parker, 1961-1978*, was also published in 1978. The volume collected her previously published works and curated them into themes (“married,” “liberation fronts,” “being gay,” and “love poems.”) Most of the poems were previously published works, but some new poems, including the title poem “Movement in Black” were new. “Movement in Black,” one of Parker’s longer works, like her earlier poems “where will you be” and “I have a dream...” is a call to action. The poem chronicles the freedom struggles of black American from slavery to the present day. Like many of Parker’s longer works, the poem features a rhythmic refrain that links each section’s different subject:

Movement in black  
movement in black  
can’t keep ‘em back  
movement in black



The first section of seven, four-line stanzas describes chattel slavery in the United States, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and hints at slave rebellion. The narrative voice alternates between third person (“They”) and first (“I am the slave”).

After a repetition of the refrain, the second section moves the narrative from all black people to “the Black woman,” assuming a consistent first-person voice. In this section, Parker reveals black women’s involvement in all phases of American history and a variety of revolutions, fights, and occupations: “I am the Black woman/ & I have been all over.” “all over” includes aiding the fight for American independence during the revolution, traveling Westward as part of the migration of American pioneers, and performing manual labor. Parker centers the black woman, reclaiming her rightful place as a leader in Black Freedom movements:

I am the Black woman  
& i have been all over  
up on platforms & stages  
talking about freedom  
freedom for Black folks  
freedom for women  
In the civil war too  
carrying messages,  
bandaging bodies  
spying and lying  
the south lost  
& i still lost  
but i was there  
& i kept on moving

The poem commemorates black women’s activism, asserting that black women were “there” during the Civil Rights movement both,

...on the bus  
with Rosa Parks  
& in the street  
with Martin King

Parker traces black women's involvement with major black activist organizations and incidents including SNCC, CORE, the Watts riots, and the Black Panthers. Her list continues by asserting black women's involvement in the feminist movement and gay liberation movement: "yes I was there/ & I'm still moving."

The third section, again marked by an iteration of the refrain, lists black women's personas and work from Bessie Smith the blues singer to schoolteachers to black nannies of white children, including respectable and deviant identities. The speaker claims and embodies each persona using the first person voice. The fourth section is a "roll call" of black women from "Phyliss [sic] Wheatley" to Nikki Giovanni, ending with five, repeated declarations of "and me." Here the speaker again explicitly locates herself in a long and diverse tradition of black women artists and activists. The next stanza acknowledges the gaps in this "roll call" and the continued invisibility of black women's work and history: "& all the names we forgot to say/ & all the names we didn't know/ & all the names we don't know, yet."

Given that at the time the poem is first performed in 1977 and then first published in 1978 at which point black women were still working to recover their literary foremothers and claim diverse identities that has been erased by others, "Movement in

Black” is revolutionary. It not only demonstrates that Parker was aware of the history of black women’s literary and artistic work in the United States but it also proves her commitment to sharing that knowledge, making sure that others knew it, too. It is part of a larger project among black feminists to recover and reclaim black women’s history, especially black women’s writing. In addition to commemorative poems like Parker’s, this effort involved academic projects, literary anthologies, and published bibliographies.<sup>223</sup>

The final section continues the first person narrative of the Black woman using lyrical, mythic imagery:

I am the Black woman  
I am the child of the sun  
the daughter of the dark  
I carry fire to burn the world  
I am water to quench its throat  
I am the product of slaves  
I am the offspring of queens  
I am still as silence

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<sup>223</sup> For example, see Barbara Smith’s poem “Theft” in *Lesbian Poetry* (1981), which is about the black queer poet Angelina Weld Grimké; Ann Allen Shockley, “The Black Lesbian in American Literature” in *Conditions: Five*; JR Roberts, *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* published by Naiad Press in 1981; Barbara Christian’s 1985 essay “No More Buried Lives: The theme of Lesbianism in Lorde, Naylor, Shange and Walker” takes its name from Gloria T. Hull’s essay on Grimké, “‘Under the Days’: The Buried Life and Poetry of Angelina Weld Grimké” published in *Conditions: Five*; Mari Evan’s 1984 study *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* also participated in this project of literary genealogy as did Mary Helen Washington’s *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women (1860-1960)* (1988) and her two earlier anthologies of black women’s writing *Black-Eyed Susans* (1975) and *Midnight Birds* (1980).

I flow as the stream

In this section, Parker uses seemingly contradictory images (“child of the sun”; “daughter of the dark”) to illustrate black women’s power and diversity. The poem concludes with the declaration “I am the Black woman” followed by five repetitions of “I am a survivor.” The poem’s closing emphasizes black women’s strength, their will to survive. Parker often performed the poem with other black women, including the women who she performed with as part of the Varied Voices of Black Women Tour, which I will discuss further in chapter 4. Thus, when performed live, the poem was not only an ode to black women’s power, strength, and rich history but also a performance, an embodiment of those traits by both individual black women and the community of black women created by the performance.

Parker’s fifth collection *Jonestown and Other Madness*, published in 1984, is brief, containing only eleven poems. Of the collection, Parker writes, “This book came about because we have become too quiet. We go to our jobs and raise our families and turn our minds away from the madness that surrounds us.”<sup>224</sup> The poems are a call to renewed vigilance and political activism during an age of revived American conservatism under Reagan. The volume includes several love poems, a complaint about people asking a writer if she has “written anything new,” a poem addressed to her black, gay “brother,” and several other poems about specific newsworthy incidents involving the lesbian and black communities.

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<sup>224</sup> Parker, “foreword” in *Jonestown and Other Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1985).

The title poem, “jonestown,” is about the 1978 Jonestown massacre, in which more than 900 members of the People’s Temple, led by Jim Jones, died after drinking poison. In the foreword to the collection, Parker writes,

The tragedy of Jonestown occurred in 1978. It is amazing to me that we have not demanded better explanations of what happened. As I travel and talk with people, I find that most of them do not believe what they have been told. Yet we still know very little. I must ask the question: If 900 white people had gone to country with a Black minister and ‘committed suicide,’ would we have accepted the answers we were given so easily?

The refrain in “jonestown”—“Black folks do not commit suicide”—troubles the official narrative of what happened in Guyana and links it to other forms of racial violence. The poem begins with Parker’s recollections of growing up in the segregated South. It then transitions to a meditation on learned tenets of racial difference, specifically, “white folks are crazy.” Parker reveals that, although she has “discarded” “many messages” about racial difference as an adult, “one returns to haunt her:” “Black folks do not commit suicide.”

Parker connects the experience of watching the news and learning of the Jonestown tragedy to her uncle’s death:

he died in prison  
suicide the authorizes said  
‘Boy just up and hung hisself’  
and I remember my mother

her disbelief, her grief  
‘The white folks kilt my brother  
Dave didn’t commit no suicide’  
...  
and we all knew  
Dave died not by his hands  
some guard decided  
that nigger should die

Parker depicts the mass, ritual cult suicide in Guyana as a form of racial violence, linking it to centuries of history of extrajudicial killings of African Americans in the United States. She views the tragedy both as an extension of the practice of racial violence and as a result of the persistent social neglect historically experienced by black people. The poem continues by describing Parker’s reaction to the sensational news coverage of the massacre, including a mistake in reporting a victim’s name that leads a friend to call her to ask, “are you alive.” She despairs that many of the mostly black members joined Jones’s church because, “No one had ever cared/ that much about [them] before.” In doing so, she lays the blame for the massacre at the feet of a long list of authority figures—politicians, welfare officers, church people, etc.—whose role in maintaining the poverty and oppression of black communities all across the U.S.—in both “small southern towns” and “big northern cities”—she believes has led to the deaths of so many black people in a compound in Guyana.

Another poem in the collection, “georgia, georgia georgia on my mind” signifies on the blues standard of the same name and ponders the Atlanta child murders, the killing of 28 black children and adolescents in Atlanta over the course of two years from 1979 to 1981. Again, Parker ultimately blames society for the death of these black people. She writes, “I know who the killers are/ and know the killer will go untried.” As in “Jonestown,” Parker links the poverty in black communities to their vulnerability: “A rich kid is not tempted/ by candy.” She believes these killings are symptomatic of a larger, system societal problem of racial inequality. According to Parker, even if an individual is “caught” and persecuted, “It won’t matter” because “...society has provided/the lure.” Thus, “Long after the murders of/ Atlanta are solved/ the killer will remain free.”

The third poem in the collection that addresses a newsworthy event is “one thanksgiving day,” which recounts the case of Priscilla Ford, a black woman, who drove her car down a sidewalk in Las Vegas on Thanksgiving Day in 1980, killing six people and wounding twenty-three more. Parker attributes Ford’s rampage to a lifetime of racist mistreatment. The third stanza begins, “Priscilla Priscilla/ who did you see?/ what faces from your past?” and catalogues a list of figures who may have mistreated Ford because of her race, a waitress, a security guard, a store clerk, her child’s teacher. Parker depicts Ford’s crime as a dramatic “reversal of the present order,”<sup>225</sup> a strike back against white supremacy and the racist, capitalist system that props it up. Parker seems to identify with Ford and uses her to ventriloquize her own frustrations, evident throughout this volume

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<sup>225</sup> Becky Birtha, “Speaking Out Loudly Before the Madness: A Review of *Jonestown and Other Madness*,” *off our backs* 15.10 (1985): 17.

and in her other work, with the racial climate of the United States and the injustices of a capitalist system.

The penultimate poem in the collection, “bar conversation” is also in response to a recent event, but it levies a specific critique of the lesbian feminist community. Specifically, it links a contentious issue in the lesbian community to Parker’s commitment to anti-racism. Lorde and Parker were both active in the feminist movement during a period from the late 1970s through the 1980s, which historians have called the Sex Wars. The Sex Wars saw sustained debate over what constituted “feminist” sex. The debate divided the feminist movement into roughly two camps: pro-sex/sex radical feminists and anti-pornography feminists. The second group of feminists, led by feminist critics Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon, believed that pornography was inherently sexist and promoted violence against women. Feminists who shared this viewpoint also objected to other “deviant” sexual practices, including sadomasochism and role-playing. Anti-pornography feminists believed that, in addition to promoting violence against women, these and other power-inflected sexual practices, had the additional danger of further cementing patriarchal power relations and sometimes perpetuating racist ideologies, and thus having especially pernicious effects for women of color.<sup>226</sup> This harm-based argument led many black feminists, including Alice Walker and bell hooks, to ally themselves with anti-pornography feminists.

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<sup>226</sup> As Jennifer Nash (2008) has argued, anti-pornography feminists argued that in addition to the racial elements in pornography compounded or “intensifie[d]” the gendered harms of pornography for women of color. Thus they represented pornography as *especially* harmful to non-white women, bolstering their claims about the inherent harmfulness of pornography and enabling them to enroll women of color as potential allies in their efforts.



Lorde and Parker were both involved in this debate and their work appeared in two feminist anti-sadomasochism anthologies *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (1982) and *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties* (1993). Parker's poem "bar conversation" comments on the controversy by responding to the alleged assault on Pat Califia in 1982. Califia was accused of carving a swastika on a woman's shoulder without her consent during s/m play. The victim's friends retaliated by breaking into Califia's house and assaulting her.<sup>227</sup>

"bar conversation" narrates the aftermath of a conversation Parker has in a bar with a woman "who wants [her to be] a spokesperson for/ sado-masochism/among lesbians." The woman tells her, "If you talk about it/ then women will listen/ and know it's ok." The white woman seems to be soliciting Parker's support as a black lesbian poet because her positionality would, supposedly, allow her to refute claims that s/m was a racist practice. Parker's "first impulse is to dismiss/ the entire conversation as more ramblings of a SWG [Silly White Girl]," thereby associating the practice with "silly" white feminists. The rest of the poem sees Parker imagining traveling back in time "first to the sixties/ back to the cramped living rooms/ activist dykes/ consciousness raising sessions"; "...to the halls/ where we sat hours upon hours/ arguing with Gay men/ trying to build a united movement"; and "...to the jails/ where women sat bruised and beaten/ singing songs of liberation/ through puffed lips." In each historic scene of gay struggle,

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<sup>227</sup> "califia attacked for carving swastika on s&m partner; women will be tried." *off our backs* 13, no. 1 (1983): 5.

Parker asks the groups of women if the right to practice s/m is what they fought for: “Did we take to the streets/ so women can carve swastikas on their bodies?” After “the poll is complete,” Parker concludes, “no, no no no/ this is not why we did it/ this is not why we continue to do.” She believes that sexual play that imitates fascism, oppression, and violence has no place in a community that fought against those forces for so many years.

The final stanza of the poem summarizes Parker’s position:

We do not need to play at being victim  
we need not practice pain  
we need not encourage helplessness  
they lurk outside our doors  
follow us through the streets  
and claim our lives daily.  
We must not offer haven  
for fascists and pigs  
be it real or fantasy  
the line is too unclear.

Parker is concerned that the racist power dynamics in s/m fantasies could potentially invade and influence the real world, having real negative effects for women of color. Her critique echoes those levied by anti-pornography feminists. Parker’s engagement with this controversy reveals another way in which her participation in the women’s movement was shaped by her race. She is disturbed that some of her “sisters” would

eroticize institutions and practices that have harmed her and other people of color. Parker is especially horrified that a white woman would ask her to lend her voice to the ideological defense of a practice that horrifies her, simply to use her race to lend authority to the pro-s/m faction's position.

Parker was disappointed by the response this poem received. In 1988 she wrote to Lorde that she was "glad" to see an interview Lorde did with Susan Leigh Starr about lesbian sadomasochism published in her essay collection *A Burst of Light*. Parker wrote, "I was feeling quote isolated and alone since 'Bar Conversation'. A few women have approached me and damn near whispered that they were glad I did the poem, but for the most part there has been silence."<sup>228</sup> Even the response to the poem within the feminist community was ultimately alienating and disappointing to Parker.

Although I have focused on Parker's poetry, her feminist work was not limited to her writing. She also was called upon to perform and appear at conferences about and benefits for gay and lesbian and Third World Women's issues. Her activism, like that of many black feminists of the period, spanned a range of issues. For example, she participated in several fundraisers and performances for women in prison, in an event in solidarity of the many "disappeared" Chilean political prisoners during the Pinochet regime, and a feminist forum on Iran at the San Francisco women's building. Parker's politics were not limited to anti-racism or feminism; she also embraced anti-capitalist and

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<sup>228</sup> Pat Parker to Audre Lorde, 8 and 9 September 1988, Pat Parker Papers, Box 5, Folder 1, Schlesinger Library.

anti-facist movements and issues, which she viewed as inextricably linked to her own experiences of oppression.

*Audre Lorde: The Black Unicorn*

I turn now to Lorde, to whom I devote less space in this chapter, in part because she is already so well canonized and studied. Rather than trace the development of her black lesbian feminist aesthetic and sensibility across her corpus, I will briefly discuss how her work, like Parker's, merged her concerns as a black person, a black woman, and a black lesbian feminist, refusing to elide any part of her identity and linking various freedom struggles. Then I will examine how she navigated these identities in her professional and personal relationships with white feminists and white feminist institutions and organizations. In particular, I focus on how she used her role as an editor for feminist literary magazines to advocate for women of color writers and how she conceptualized her relationship to the white women in her life.

Lorde was born in New York City to Caribbean immigrant parents. She was the youngest of three girls. Her autobiomythography *Zami* chronicles her childhood through her early twenties. In 1962 she married Edwin Rollins, a white attorney. They had two children, Jonathan and Elizabeth, prior to their divorce in 1970. After the dissolution of her marriage, due in part to her affair with Frances Clayton, her long-term partner, Lorde came out as a lesbian and moved to Staten Island, where she and Frances made a home and raised Lorde's children. Lorde spent much of her career teaching courses on writing

and about racism at John Jay College in New York. She published more than a dozen collections of poetry and essays over the course of her career.

Lorde's early collections address a range of topics, including racism and sexism. Critics agree that her 1978 collection *The Black Unicorn* represented a profound shift in the themes and aesthetic of her work. Cheryl Clarke has described the collection as Lorde's attempt to create "a distinct black lesbian feminist mythopoetic space that puts black women at the center."<sup>229</sup> In the collection, Lorde uses African religious myth and imagery to construct a lineage of black lesbians in which she placed herself. In *The Black Unicorn*, as elsewhere in her work, Lorde commented on contemporary events, like the imprisonment of black freedom fighter Assata Shakur. In doing so, Lorde like Parker refused to separate any of her identities, bringing her blackness along with her identities as a mother and a lesbian to her work. Of particular interest to me in this chapter are the ways in which Lorde brought the political commitments evident in her work, including her speeches and essays, to her personal relationships and her leadership roles in feminist institutions. Specifically, I argue that Lorde's work as a poetry editor for feminist publications, in which she worked to include and promote poetry by women of color and to convince her white colleagues of the importance of this project, is part of her Black feminist intervention into white-dominated feminist literary and print culture.

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<sup>229</sup> Cheryl Clarke, *"After Mecca": Woman Poet and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 132.

As Clausen noted in 1975, Lorde was one of the few black women at the time in an editorial position, with the ability to decide who and what was published.<sup>230</sup> Lorde used her editorial power to promote and support other black women writers. Lorde worked for a time as poetry editor at both *Amazon Quarterly* and *Chrysalis*. At both publications, Lorde actively sought to publish the work of women of color. After her relationship with *Amazon Quarterly* soured, Lorde subsequently forwarded poems that she had wanted to publish to Bulkin and Larkin to include in *Amazon Poetry*. In a 1975 letter to Parker, Lorde wrote, “I wanted the women whose poems I’d intended to print in AQ (yours among them) to have some other option other than the gnashing of teeth.”<sup>231</sup> Lorde was responsible for the inclusion of Pat Parker’s work in the volume and thanked by the editors for “help[ing] us discover some of these poets.”<sup>232</sup> Although at the time of her exit from *Amazon Quarterly* Lorde wrote, “AQ shouldn’t have been a total loss, at least I’ve learned something – if only to say no in the future!”<sup>233</sup> she would only a year later accept the position of poetry editor at the new feminist literary publication *Chrysalis*.

When Lorde accepted the position as poetry editor of *Chrysalis*, she did so with a specific vision of the place of poetry in the magazine and with the intention to include the voices of as many women of color poets as possible. As *Chrysalis*’s poetry editor, Lorde

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<sup>230</sup> This of course ignores the work that Toni Morrison was doing at the time as an editor at Random House.

<sup>231</sup> Lorde to Parker, July 15 1975, Pat Parker Papers, Box 5, Folder 1; The “gnashing of teeth” likely refers to white editors’ discomfort with women of color’s work and concerns, a difficulty Lorde would continue to experience when she worked with *Chrysalis*.

<sup>232</sup> “Acknowledgements” in *Amazon Poetry: An anthology*, eds. Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin (New York: Out & Out Books, 1975).

<sup>233</sup> Lorde to Parker, July 15 1975, Pat Parker Papers, Box 5, Folder 1. Schlesinger Library.

was solely responsible for evaluating submissions and choosing which poems to print in the magazine. In that capacity, she actively solicited and promoted the work of women of color. Early on she published other black women poets including June Jordan and Pat Parker in *Chrysalis*.<sup>234</sup> By 1978, the list of women of color published by *Chrysalis* had increased as a result of her work and “now included Barbara Smith, Lorraine Bethel, (Akasha) Gloria Hull, and other involved with the black feminist retreats<sup>235</sup>—Lorde still noted that she was deeply concerned about the magazine’s treatment of poetry.”<sup>236</sup> She had become frustrated by the editorial board’s decisions about the place of poetry in the magazine. Because Lorde believed poetry was the most accessible form for poor women and women of color, she viewed the magazine’s prioritization of prose as discriminatory. “She was [also] impatient with the way the magazine presented [poetry], and that it delayed publication and allowed typographical errors by the printers.”<sup>237</sup> The lack of any definite plans to publish a poetry issue, an idea first suggested by Lorde and for which she had reserved a group of submitted poems, also upset her.<sup>238</sup> During this period, *Chrysalis* weathered financial difficulties and, although Lorde appreciated the struggle to merely keep the magazine afloat, “she did not waver from her sense that the magazine disrespected, if not sacrificed, poetry and poets within its pages.”<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> De Veaux, 177-178.

<sup>235</sup> The Black Feminist Retreats were a series of seven retreats held between 1976 and 1980 in which a group of black women came together to discuss black feminism, their relationship to the Women’s Liberation Movement, and scholarly creative work. I discuss it in depth in chapter 4.

<sup>236</sup> De Veaux, 211.

<sup>237</sup> De Veaux, 212.

<sup>238</sup> De Veaux, 212.

<sup>239</sup> De Veaux, 212.

Lorde's frustration came to a head when *Chrysalis* did not respond to her request that they publish a review of *The Black Unicorn*.<sup>240</sup> Lorde had considered resigning after her mastectomy in 1978 but did not officially sever ties with the magazine until January of 1979. In her letter to the editorial board, Lorde informed them that she "expected [them] to deal with any future poetry inquiries...[and that] she'd already selected the poetry for several future issues and was still invested in her responsibility to those poets."<sup>241</sup> The white lesbian poet Adrienne Rich, who was also a member of the editorial board and Lorde's friend,<sup>242</sup> supported her position and corresponded with the editorial board as a group and individually about her resignation and need for the magazine to commit more fully to including the voices of women of color.

Lorde's departure from *Chrysalis* was complicated by her insistence that her decisions about the poetry to be included in future issues be honored, despite her resignation as poetry editor. When the magazine did not print a poem she had selected by the black poet Toi Derricote in Issue #8, Lorde was furious. The editorial board had omitted Derricote's poem in favor of "a tribute to her by Mary McAnally, an Oklahoma-based poet...as a way to thank Lorde for her 'priceless contribution to *Chrysalis*.'"<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> De Veaux, 227.

<sup>241</sup> De Veaux, 232.

<sup>242</sup> Lorde and Rich first met while both were working as instructors in the SEEK program at the City College of New York. They eventually became close friends, traveling in the same circles, and often gave readings together. Lorde's feelings for Rich extended beyond friendship. She felt there was a "charged sexuality" between the two of them and Rich frequently had to reject her advances. Lorde's attraction to and frustration with Rich shaped their conversations about their work, feminism, and racism. (See De Veaux)

<sup>243</sup> De Veaux, 245.



Lorde, who had already requested that her name be removed from the masthead, wrote the board and requested that they do so immediately.<sup>244</sup>

By the fall of 1979, the conflict with *Chrysalis* had grown to include other women. In addition to Rich's support, the magazine received letters in support of Lorde and critiquing what they perceived as the magazine's racism. In a September of 1979 letter to the editorial board, June Jordan went so far as to resign from her post as contributing editor in protest, charging the magazine with being responsible for both her resignation and Lorde's due to their "stupid and racist editorial policies."<sup>245</sup> That the women involved often forwarded copies of their letters to other women—for instance, Jordan sent carbons of her resignation letter to six women including Lorde, Rich, and Barbara Smith—also increased the drama surrounding the conflict and the hurt feelings on both side. This practice marshaled support and was reminiscent of protest letters used by black feminists to protest racism within the movement, demonstrating the networks of support that existed among black feminists and their commitment to supporting each other and the larger mission of practicing anti-racism within the women's movement.<sup>246</sup>

In the midst of her dispute with *Chrysalis*, Lorde continued to hold other white women feminists accountable for their racism. It was during this time that Lorde wrote her now infamous letter to the white feminist theologian Mary Daly in response to Daly's book *Gyn/Ecology*. She criticized Daly for focusing her analysis primarily on "white,

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<sup>244</sup> De Veaux, 246.

<sup>245</sup> Jordan to Editors of *Chrysalis*, 10 Sept. 1979, Adrienne Rich Papers, File 440, Schlesinger Library.

<sup>246</sup> Black feminists, like others, used letters to the editors and open letters to express their concerns and, usually, their disapproval. I discuss several instances of such letter-writing in chapter 4.

Western European, Judeo-Christian goddess images” and for including as her only discussion of African women a critique of the practice of genital mutilation.<sup>247</sup> Although Daley “anticipated criticism by noting that Western critiques of such atrocities...were neither racist nor imperialist, and served the larger cause of women’s emancipation,” “Lorde did not see it that way.”<sup>248</sup> Lorde read Daly’s depiction of African women “as preyers upon each other—as instruments of each other’s destruction.”<sup>249</sup> In her biography of Lorde, Alexis De Veaux argues that, timed as it was in the midst of her battle with the white women of *Chrysalis*’s editorial board and “at a time when even the most ‘radical’ white feminist intellectuals had little, if any, knowledge of black women’s history or were concerned with the complexity of that history,” “Lorde’s critique of Daly’s work [constituted] an aggressive attack on white feminist scholarship in general.”<sup>250</sup>

In May, Lorde sent copies of her letter to Daly to both Rich and Michelle Cliffe, Rich’s black lesbian partner who was also a poet. This new dispute strained her relationship with Rich, who was also close friends with Daly and refused to take sides in the conflict. In November, Lorde wrote to Rich in an attempt to repair the damage to their relationship caused by the protracted fight with the magazine, her criticism of Daly, and other misunderstandings between the two of them. Lorde begins the letter with a wish for reconciliation. She writes, “I am writing to you because I don’t want to leave it where it was at parting, and because I believe there is more for each of us to learn from this bad place between us, and I am hungry for it; I need it, not merely in my head, but open

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<sup>247</sup> De Veaux 235

<sup>248</sup> Daley qtd. in De Veaux, 235; De Veaux 235.

<sup>249</sup> Lorde qtd. in De Veaux, 235.

<sup>250</sup> De Veaux 235, 236.

between us.”<sup>251</sup> She asks Rich to read the letter even if “it is an imposition...in the name of friendship; for does it mean we never speak to each other if sometimes we say the wrong things?”<sup>252</sup> Lorde expresses her hope for reconciliation as a physical and emotional need, a hunger. She also believes that the “bad place between [her and Rich]” can be productive, something they can both learn and grow from.

Lorde continues her letter by describing the context in which she is writing it:

I am writing to you in the grip of a fear which does not diminish even as I speak. I sit in here in this peaceful and secluded haven they burned another cross in Staten Island, two nights ago, on Osgood Avenue about 5 blocks away from us, in front of an ‘interracial house.’ My family is there, I am here, and the papers to do what I need are languishing in my briefcase. That fact colors my view with a particular desperate urgency that is different from the ones which color yours. I do not expect you to feel what I am feeling, but I do want you to recognize it and not dismiss it as a paranoid fantasy.<sup>253</sup>

A recent racist incident in her Staten Island neighborhood where she lived with her two children and her partner Frances Clayton had heightened Lorde’s awareness of the differences between her life and concerns, as a black woman, and Rich’s, as a white woman. As much as intellectual disputes and personal conflicts have a negative effect on her life, Lorde knows that for her and family there is always the threat of actual, physical violence that is the product of racism and homophobia. Lorde goes on to address the history of discussions around and issues of racism in her friendship with Rich. She admits, “Even though it was very painful for me, I learned a lot from our discussion

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<sup>251</sup> Lorde to Rich, Nov.1979, Folder 105, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives.

<sup>252</sup> *ibid*

<sup>253</sup> *ibid*

around [Rich's essay on racism in women's studies] Disloyal to Civilization."<sup>254</sup> Lorde also writes that she has felt for Rich as Rich's attempts to combat racism in her work and intellectual endeavors has caused her to lose friends.

But the bulk of the letter is an attempt by Lorde to wrestle with the question that she believes governs her friendship with Rich: "What are the demands and the pitfall of an open and close and direct relationship between a black woman and a white woman who are not lovers?"<sup>255</sup> After thanking Rich for her friendship and support and apologizing for any hurt she has caused her, "if I have given you less than what you have needed from me as a friend, please know it has not been a wilful [sic] with-holding,"<sup>256</sup> Lorde outlines her grievances with Rich. She writes that she took Rich at "her word" that the "Chrysalis women"<sup>257</sup> were trustworthy and holds Rich somewhat accountable for her difficulties with the magazine. Lorde also articulates her frustration with an interview Rich conducted with her on behalf of a feminist publication.<sup>258</sup> She explains that she was under the impression that Rich wished "to write something about [her] work. The next thing I knew it was an interview. So what it felt like was, when it came right down to it, you did what all the other white girls do, stick a mike in my face and say talk, and call

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<sup>254</sup> Lorde to Rich, Nov. 1979, Folder 105, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives.

<sup>255</sup> *ibid*

<sup>256</sup> *ibid*

<sup>257</sup> *ibid*

<sup>258</sup> This interview was commissioned by Marilyn Hacker, who was serving as a guest editor for *Woman Poet: The East*, where an abbreviated version was published. The interview in its entirety appeared in *Signs* 6.4 in 1981 and was subsequently reprinted in *Sister Outsider*.

that dealing with my WORK.”<sup>259</sup> To Lorde, the interview felt like an excuse to not engage critically with her work and thus a betrayal of her trust in Rich.

Once she has outlined her complaints, Lorde embarks upon an exploration of the emotional risks and pitfalls of her friendship with Rich. As Lorde had previously told Rich, “she could, in principle, not trust a white woman she had not slept with.”<sup>260</sup> As Lorde elaborates upon her belief, which she would later articulate in “Uses of the Erotic,”<sup>261</sup> that a sexual connection or encounter has the power to produce trust between women and overcome difference: “When two women make love beyond the first exploration, they meet each other’s knowing, in a way sometimes that the whole rest of their relationship attempts to understand, attempts to make clear.”<sup>262</sup> Here “meet each other’s knowing” signifies both an exchange of inner knowledge and vulnerability and the creation of a bridge across difference.

Lorde describes her predicament working with white women this way:

But as a black woman dealing emotionally on any but the most superficially prescribed and defended levels, with white women who I do not know intimately, means for me to be constantly vulnerable to racial instances of varying degrees, the possibilities of racial incidents which may or may not be so. It’s like low-level radiation. Very costly, and I avoid it whenever I can... Since all of this is in addition to the difficulties we all have as women dealing with each other, that is very costly, indeed. And for me, there’s got to be a lot coming back in order to make it worthwhile. From you and Clare obviously there is. (white women I’m open to whom I haven’t slept with) From Susan G. and Kirsten and Deena and

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<sup>259</sup> Lorde to Rich, Nov.1979, Folder 105, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives.

<sup>260</sup> De Veaux 182

<sup>261</sup> Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984).

<sup>262</sup> Lorde to Rich, Nov.1979, Folder 105, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives

Mary obviously there is not. I can only remember you are not connected with Mary Daly's ugliness that day when you recognize that it exists, and how I felt about it. And I recognize how you feel about here. Then none of that needs to lie between you and me anymore.<sup>263</sup>

Like Parker, Lorde struggled to fully trust white women within the feminist movement because of the constant danger of "racial incidents" involving them. Here Lorde again explicitly ties sexual intimacy to the ability to build trust across difference. She notes how rare it is for her to trust a white woman that she has not slept with and despite stating that she does trust Rich, asserts that her trust may be contingent upon Rich recognizing "Mary Daly's ugliness" by which she means her racism. She desires an explicit statement or show of allegiance, even at the expense of Rich's relationships with other women, something that Rich was ultimately unable to give her.

Rich responded to Lorde's letter on November 10th "in tears of pain and rage." Although she reveals that she "can't write at the length [she] want[s] to" because of upcoming deadlines, she uses the letter to address Lorde's "complete and total misunderstanding" of the circumstances under which she came to conduct an interview with Lorde.<sup>264</sup> Rich tells Lorde that she had indeed begun writing an essay about Lorde's poetry that spring, a project that she felt needed considerable time and "could [not] knock off like a book review for the TIMES."<sup>265</sup> The interview came about after Marilyn Hacker contacted Rich in May about featuring Lorde's work in a magazine, which would

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<sup>263</sup> *ibid*

<sup>264</sup> Rich to Lorde, 10 Nov. 1979, Folder 105, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives.

<sup>265</sup> *ibid*

include “poems, an interview, [and] a critical article.”<sup>266</sup> Because Hacker “wanted the article to be by a Black woman,” she asked Rich if she would consider doing the interview.<sup>267</sup> Rich writes,

I took it on because it was you, your work, not because you are Black and I didn’t know any other way of dealing with your work. To suggest that I opportunistically substituted an interview for the kind of work involved in writing a critical essay is to cheapen me, my relationship to your poetry, my integrity as a writer... I don’t need to interview you to push my way in the world, I did it because I care very deeply that your poetry have as wide an audience as it possibly can, because I think you are a great poet.<sup>268</sup>

Lorde, Rich writes, has done her a great “injustice” by accusing her of using her for her own personal gain, for behaving like the white women that Lorde detests. Rich goes on to detail the great amount of work and time she has put into the interview, the first she has ever conducted.

Rich also rebuts Lorde’s claim “that [she] could take your feelings about what’s been happening on Staten Island as a paranoid fantasy.”<sup>269</sup> She writes, “It is real to me: not just the fact...but all of it together for you, the inability to get away, to avail yourself of that ‘haven’, the urgency you really are feeling around your work, and the lives of those you love, your own life threatened from within and from without.” Rich “believe[s] she] can understand all this enough to take it seriously, [even if she] can feel it as

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<sup>266</sup> *ibid*

<sup>267</sup> *ibid*

<sup>268</sup> *ibid*

<sup>269</sup> *ibid*

Adrienne though not as Audre. Can this be enough?”<sup>270</sup> At the same time that she expresses concern and empathy for Lorde’s situation, Rich acknowledges that, as a white woman, she will never truly understand exactly how Lorde feels. Promising to address Lorde’s other claims in the future, Rich ends the letter I am frightening [sic] angry with you, but I love you, and I care more than you believe about creating justice between us.”<sup>271</sup>

Indeed this letter does not mark the end of Rich’s engagement with issues of racism in the women’s movement and at large, both with Lorde and elsewhere in her work. At the same time, she is continuing her correspondence with the *Chrysalis* women, especially Susan Griffin, and taking them to task around “the issue of racism” in relation to the magazine’s editorial process.<sup>272</sup> Later that month, on November 22, Rich writes another letter to Lorde. In it she writes at length about how she must address conflicts between herself and others, such as with the *Chrysalis* women and Daly, herself and based on her own desires and feelings, not necessarily how Audre would have her address them. She also refuses to completely cut these other white women out of her life. She writes, “What I have to do with/among white women around our various and differing racism is something I have to find out for myself and with other white women who are trying to do some of the same kinds of work.”<sup>273</sup> Rich believes this work is as important as that she does as “part of a growing community of women of color as well as

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<sup>270</sup> *ibid*

<sup>271</sup> *ibid*

<sup>272</sup> A copy of a letter from Rich to Susan Griffin dated November 19, 1979 appears in a folder of Rich’s correspondence in Audre Lorde’s papers, suggesting that Rich sent a copy to Lorde.

<sup>273</sup> Rich to Lorde, 10 Nov. 1979, Folder 105, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives



white women – women trying desperately to find ways of acting together, make coalitions, be mutually heard – [and] this gives me strength and challenges to do what I see as necessary for me to vis-à-vis women who are not even making that effort.”<sup>274</sup> She asks Lorde to consider her partial response to Lorde’s letter as not “an answer, but rather a continuation” of their ongoing engagement with issues of race and racism and re-affirms her love for Lorde and her desire to “struggle with [her].”<sup>275</sup>

Towards the end of the letter, Rich references a new poem Lorde is working on about white women. And encourages Lorde “to ask many more questions of yourself about the meaning of white women in your life (and the meaning of black women in your life) and that [their] friendship, our intricate connectedness, is also going to be affected by how you ask those questions and what answers you come to.”<sup>276</sup> In a letter dated January of the next year, Rich responds to a draft of this poem that Lorde has evidently shared with her. She praises the draft and encourages Lorde to include “more of why [she] and F[rances] are doing this together at all.”<sup>277</sup> Rich tells Lorde the poem, which addresses the question “how do a black woman and a white woman who are not lovers meet, try to found a justice between them,” “has the potential of becoming a kind of broadside sweeping us all into a new recognition of necessity and battle.”<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Rich to Lorde, 22 Nov. 1979, Folder 105, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives

<sup>275</sup> *ibid*

<sup>276</sup> *ibid*

<sup>277</sup> Rich to Lorde, 11 Jan. 1980, Folder 105, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives

<sup>278</sup> *ibid*

The poem Rich references was originally titled “Notes About Us” and a version of it was published in *Azalea: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians*<sup>279</sup> in its winter of ’79-’80 issue. A revised and expanded version of the poem titled “Outlines” was published in Lorde’s collection *Our Dead Behind Us* in 1986. Although initially inspired by the conflict with Rich, the poem became a meditation on her relationship with Frances Clayton as much as an exploration of the difficulties and challenges of connection between a black woman and a white woman. Its insights can also be applied to the challenges of interracial coalition building within the feminist movement.

Both poems begin with the same four-line stanza, which troubles claims of physical racial difference by noting the shared physical characteristics that keep all humans alive, specifically the circulatory system: “What hue lies in the slit of anger/ ample and pure as night/ what color the channel/ that blood comes through?” And although the revised version is longer and divided into five sections, both poems repeat the same imagery of “A Black woman and a white woman” struggling to love one another in a hostile world using maritime metaphors about navigation and storms. Some phrases are lifted almost verbatim from Lorde’s letters to Rich. The poems catalog the threats to a relationship between a black woman and a white woman. A stanza in “Notes,” that is excised from “Outlines,” lists these dangers thusly:

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<sup>279</sup> Christian, Linda Brown, and Joan Gibbs. In its first issue, the editors wrote, “AZALEA comes at a time when we as Lesbian ‘women of color’ must make space for defining ourselves and sharing our thoughts with each other.” The editors intended the magazine to serve as a “concrete place for [lesbians of color] to explore our own concepts.” The magazine published many black lesbian writers, including Lorde, Ann Allen Shockley, Sapphire, and Michelle Cliff. For a longer treatment of the magazine, see chapter 4.

A black woman and a white woman  
in the open fact of our loving  
with not only our enemies hands raised against us  
means a gradual sacrifice  
of all that is simple  
of pretense  
of separate solutions  
of convenient avoidance  
putting an end to running before the wind  
my blackness and her whiteness  
a new meeting  
in this world that has never been ours.

This stanza explains the necessary rejection of “simple” solutions or understandings to the problem of difference and echoes Lorde’s refusal to jettison any of her identities, what she had earlier termed, in one form as “easy blackness as salvation.”<sup>280</sup> “Outlines” contains vignettes from Lorde and Clayton’s lives, both touching like “One straight light hair on the washbasin’s rim/ difference/ innate as a borrowed scarf” and terrifying “Ten blocks down the street/ a cross is burning”. Images of loving cohabitation exist alongside those of external threats: “We rise to dogshit dumped on our front porch/ the brass windchimes from Sundance stolen”. Both poems end similarly on a note of cautious hope. I quote from “Outlines” because the lines are collected into a single stanza:

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<sup>280</sup> Lorde, “Between Ourselves,” in *Between Our Selves* (Point Reyes, CA: Eidolon Editions, 1976).

I trace the curve of your jaw  
with a lover's finger  
knowing the hardest battle  
is only the first  
how to do what we need for our living  
with honor and in love  
we have chosen each other  
and the edge of each other's battles  
the war is the same  
if we lose  
someday women's blood will congeal  
upon a dead planet  
if we win  
there is no telling.

Although the work of maintaining their relationship is hard, a "battle," besieged by the differences between them and the external forces of homophobia, racism, and sexism, it is worth the struggle on multiple fronts. Ultimately, Lorde suggests that such a union between black and white women is necessary for the survival of the planet, of the human race, that without it, there is no hope. Conversely, a world in which women work together, across difference to is infinitely possible: "if we win/ there is no telling."

I argue that Lorde's argument in "Notes" and "Outlines" can be applied to the difficulties of relating to white women in the feminist movement. Thus the claim "the

war is the same,” gestures towards the shared concerns of black and white feminists and the final utopian declaration is a hopeful prediction for the strength that interracial coalition building will bring the feminist movement. The poem(s) also warn against the dangers of “cheap alliance[s]” forged without honest attempts to reckon with “...reefs of hidden anger/ histories rallied against us.” According to Lorde, successful cross-racial feminist work necessitates conscious and purposeful work against personal and institutional racism as well as a willingness to be vulnerable. Many organizations were unable to successfully enact such a project. Although the Women’s Press Collective for a time did so, most feminist organizations struggled to do so. It frequently took concerted and sustained effort on the part of black and other third world women to build feminist institutions that were inclusive and anti-racist both in theory and in praxis. Among the battlegrounds upon which black women waged this war was academia—universities, classrooms, and professional organizations—which I will examine in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### **Black Women's Studies: Black Women in the National Women's Studies Association Transforming the Academy**

#### *Introduction*

In 1978, Black lesbian feminist writer Ann Allen Shockley published a short story, "A Case of Telemania," in the independent publication *Azalea: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians*. "A Case of Telemania," like much of Shockley's writing, including her well-known 1974 novel *Loving Her*, explored the experiences of Black lesbian women in the United States. Specifically, "Telemania" describes the experiences of Freda Delaney, a Black lesbian as a faculty member at two different colleges. I open this chapter with a brief reading of "Telemania" because it provides a useful snapshot of Black women's relationship to institutions of higher education in the 1970s and 80s, in particular how their identities shaped their sense of belonging or non-belonging as both students and faculty members. In other words, it demonstrates how academia was both a site of intellectual and activist resistance for Black women as well as a location in which their doubly-marginalized identities frequently made them vulnerable to personal and professional attacks.

"Telemania" is structured around a phone call Freda makes to her friend Harriet, a Black woman and a poet. Freda calls Harriet to catch up, using it as an opportunity to inform of her new position. She tells Harriet, "I wanted you to know that I am now on the faculty of Wilshire College in Willy, Pennsylvania. It's a predominately white school,

private and in the middle of nowhere!”<sup>281</sup> Harriet is surprised by this revelation because Freda had previously been teaching at an “all-girl Black school.”<sup>282</sup> When Harriet asks Freda, ““Didn’t you like it?”” she responds, ““Loved it! My first teaching position out of Yale. I loved going back to my roots, so to speak. Being around my people for a change. You know, after all those years being exiled at white schools. Scholarships to Putney, Marlboro, and Yale.”” For Freda teaching at the all-Black school had apparently been like coming home.

Eventually Freda reveals that she left her previous position, ““Because the Black male administration over a girls’ college, mind you, namely, the Dean, wanted to get rid of me.”” According to Freda, a combination of jealousy, misogyny, and homophobia forced her to leave the position. A female colleague, whom Freda thought of as a friend, ““who taught in the department with [her], spread the rumor that [she] was a lesbian.””<sup>283</sup> Fred attributes the spreading of the “rumor” to the other woman’s jealousy because, ““Students signed up for [Freda’s] classes more than hers and were always either hanging out in my office or at my house. Plus, [Freda] was younger than she and the girls could tie in better on my wave lengths...Besides, I had a degree from Ya—ale.””<sup>284</sup> But Freda admits to Harriet that she may have drunkenly attempted to seduce her colleague.

Freda claims that the “rumor” “practically ruined [her] for the rest of the year. Faculty members avoided [her] like the plague.”<sup>285</sup> Homosexuality is not be tolerated at

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<sup>281</sup> Ann Allen Shockley, “A Case of Telemania,” *Azalea* vol. 1, no. 3 (Fall 1978), 1.

<sup>282</sup> *ibid* 2

<sup>283</sup> *ibid* 3

<sup>284</sup> *ibid*

<sup>285</sup> *ibid* 4

an “uptight and straight-assed” “Black bourgeoisie college,” even if, as Freda notes, the other faculty were “self-righteous people who can fuck each other’s wives and husbands and get students pregnant.”<sup>286</sup> In response to the rumors, the Black, male “Dean, who’d been trying to feel [Freda’s] legs under the table at meetings all year,” had simply declined to renew her contract for the following year, forcing her to find employment elsewhere.<sup>287</sup>

When asked if she is “happy” working at a predominately white college, Freda replies, “I miss my Black sisters—” She explains, “I’ve had four Black students since I’ve been here. There aren’t enough of us Black folks here to give this God awful constant snow a color tint.” In addition, Freda is “the only Black faculty member aside from Hambuk Tore who goes around all the time in his tribal robes to let people know right off he’s not a Black American.” At Wilshire, Freda is isolated from both Black colleagues and Black students. Her description of Tore suggests that he is either an African national or a Black nationalist, either way he is unlikely to be an ally to Freda. Freda also tells Harriet, she “think[s] most of the people here [at Wilshire] are racists. [She] had to fight tooth and nail to teach a course in Afro-American history.” Freda continues, saying, “I don’t’ think they’ve ever heard of a Black or gay revolution— ” Ultimately, neither the all Black nor the predominately white institution were able to adequately support Freda as a full person. She was able to teach African American history at the all Black school but, like Alice Walker and Nella Larsen’s protagonists in *Meridian* and *Quicksand*, was unable to bear or conform to the school’s conservative

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<sup>286</sup> *ibid*

<sup>287</sup> *ibid*



social mores, especially those around the performance of gender and sexuality. At Wilshire, she is in the racial minority and still without allies amongst the faculty or students there.

Ann Allen Shockley worked as a librarian at several universities before becoming the librarian of the Special Negro Collection at the historically Black Fisk University, where she finished her career. In the 1970s and 80s she founded the Black Oral History Program and solicited interviews from many well-known Black women writers, including Alice Walker. Because Shockley was familiar with the politics of institutions of higher education due to her work, I argue that we can read “Telemania” as a reflection of her experiences and impressions of Black queer women’s experiences within universities and academia in general. Freda’s experiences reveal how Black women scholars were often outsiders at colleges and universities where they taught, whether they were predominately Black or white schools. Of course, the story exposes some level of hypocrisy both because Freda is, despite her protestations to Harriet, in fact a lesbian and, as is revealed at the very end of the story, is in a relationship with a white woman, Kimberly. Freda’s situation is complicated. For Freda, like some of Shockley’s other protagonists, white women are not always the enemy but often a realistic source of emotional support.

However, the reality for Black women in academia in the 1970s and 80s was often very different. Like Freda they struggled to form alliances with Black men or white women through their shared racial and gender identities, respectively. Black men’s sexism and homophobia and white women’s racism frequently undermined Black women’s personal and professional relationships with both groups. For example, at the

1978 National Black Writers' Conference at Howard University, Barbara Smith was attacked by the mostly male audience after sharing her paper on a panel entitled "Feminism and the Black Woman Writer." Smith's talk was a version of her groundbreaking essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," published a year earlier in 1977 in *Conditions* magazine. Like the essay, her talk included a reading of Toni Morrison's *Sula* as a lesbian novel and it is that aspect of the talk that people fixated on. June Jordan, another participant and the moderator of the panel, has written that the controversy surrounding the panel began well before the conference due to "the taboo on feminism within the Black intellectual community," and its association with the even more taboo topic of lesbianism.<sup>288</sup> Attendees dismissed Smith's argument, insulted her, and even went so far as to say they felt sorry for her.

Smith became the victim of conservative Black nationalist gender and sexuality politics. The experience was a painful one for Smith who felt utterly de- and rejected. She has described the experience as follows:

....for all these Black people at such an incredibly prestigious event as the National Black Writers' Conference, at the most prestigious Black university in the –for them to turn on me, I just thought, just kill me now. Just kill me. I mean, I don't know how I'm going to live through this because I was crushed. What this man said to me, he said, well at least they didn't lynch you. And he wasn't joking.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> June Jordan, "Where Is the Love?", in *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays* (New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002), 268.

<sup>289</sup> Loretta Ross, "Oral History Interview with Barbara Smith."

Smith's pain was compounded by this man's assertion that the verbal pillorying was not as bad as the masculine-gendered racial crime of lynching. His comment diminished her pain by questioning its scale and asserting the primacy of Black *male* experience over hers as a Black lesbian feminist. The crowd's reaction has become legend in Black literary circles and reflected that moment's general (dis)regard for Black women's literature, feminism, and Black lesbians in particular. A year after the controversial panel at the Howard Conference, *The Black Scholar* published a special issue on "The Sexism Debate." The forum appeared in response to Robert Staples's excoriation of Michele Wallace's feminist manifesto *Black Macho & the Myth of the Superwoman* and featured responses from major Black feminists, including Audre Lorde. Smith herself declined to participate. Moving forward, Smith concentrated her intellectual and activist energies within lesbian feminist circles and did not take part in conversations within the fields of Black studies or African American literary scholarship.

A year later, in 1979, Audre Lorde was invited to speak at Barnard College's Second Sex Conference, celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's foundational feminist treatise. She was one of only two women of color invited to participate.<sup>290</sup> Lorde used her remarks to criticize the event's exclusion of lesbians and women of color. She said,

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<sup>290</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, "When the Margin Is the Center: African American Feminism(s) and Difference," in *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*, eds. Joan W. Scott, Cora Kaplan, and Debra Keates (New York: Routledge, 1997), 299.

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a Black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment on the only panel at this conference where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable. To read this program is to assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when the two Black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour?<sup>291</sup>

Lorde locates this blindness towards difference within the white-dominated sphere of feminist academia. Presumably, activists and other feminists working outside the academy were both more likely to be women of color and to be aware of and concerned about issues of difference. At one point in her talk, Lorde deems this academic version of feminism to be “racist feminism,” because it does not acknowledge the differences—race, class, sexuality, etc.—among women.<sup>292</sup> Her critique extends to the logistics of the conference as well: “Why weren’t other Women of Color found to participate in this conference? Why were two phone calls to me considered a consultation? Am I the only possible source of names of Black feminists?”<sup>293</sup> Whereas Smith had been effectively ostracized from the community of Black critics at the Black Writers’ Conference on the basis of her gender and sexuality, Lorde and other women of color were left out of the conversation at the Second Sex Conference because of their race.

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<sup>291</sup> Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” 110.

<sup>292</sup> *ibid* 112

<sup>293</sup> This was not the first time that Lorde critiqued academic feminism. At the MLA in 1978, where she spoke on a “Lesbians and Literature Panel,” she exhorted her audience, presumably feminist literary scholars, to attend to how they dealt with difference in their lives and work, including the types of literature they taught in their courses.

Neither of these exclusions were intentional nor were they condoned by official policies, but they were the result of many individuals beliefs about whose voices should be prioritized at each event. So although Black women and other women of color were not barred from the Second Sex conference, the lack of effort to include them and their ideas was a result of the priorities (and blindspots) of the white feminist conference organizers and attendees. Because of the antagonism they had experienced when dealing with Black male scholars' chauvinism in the academy and in artistic and political groups during the 1960s and 1970s, Black women turned to the new field of Women's Studies and its attendant academic apparatuses (departments, conferences, etc.) as sites where they could do work that acknowledged the simultaneous effects of race and gender on their scholarship and their lives. But Feminist or women's studies conferences often only featured a couple of token nonwhite women. Black women and other women of color had to advocate for themselves and demand inclusion in this new discipline.

In the 1970s as the new academic fields of Black and women's studies had begun to be institutionalized following student-led protests in the previous decade, the study of Black women was neglected by both fields. Black men dominated Black studies departments, where Black women's history and literature were rarely discussed. And in women's studies departments, which were overwhelmingly white, the category of "women" was often, in practice, limited to white women, again rendering Black women and their experiences invisible. In response to this double erasure, Black women scholars and critics built their own field: Black women's studies. In this chapter I trace the development of Black women's studies by examining the experiences of Black women in

academe in the 1970s and 1980s and how they centered Black women in their scholarship. Their project was scholarly and activist in nature as many of the Black women researching and writing during this period saw their research and teaching as inseparable from their anti-racist and Black feminist activism. They refused to allow their multi-issue politics to be uncomplicated by the homogenizing mechanisms of academe.

The late 1970s through the 1980s were pivotal decades for Black feminist scholars and Black women's studies. This period saw a rise in the number of Black women teaching in colleges and universities and as well as an increase in Black women earning doctorates. These women used their research and positions within institutions both to conduct research on Black women's literature and history and to diversify the curricula across American colleges and universities. In this chapter, I argue that during this period Black feminist scholars and critics, worked to diversify the academy and its attendant professional organizations by demanding their work, their experiences, and they themselves be represented at events, in conference programs, and in college curricula.

During this period, Black women curated and published critical and literary anthologies as well as many special issues of feminist journals dedicated to Black and Third World Women's issues. At the same time, this cohort of Black women scholars were presenting at the major conferences of professional organizations and pushing for more diversity and more inclusive practices in those organizations. This push for greater diversity and representation of Black and other Third World Women's art and scholarship led to several groundbreaking conferences, including the Third World Women's Writers Conferences in New York City and the 1987 NWSA Conference at Spelman.

In particular, this chapter traces Black women's involvement in the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) during the first ten years of the association's existence in order to reveal how Black women's involvement and intervention in the association's activities, especially its annual conferences, resulted in a more inclusive field, both in terms of practitioners and in subjects of study. Black women repeatedly levied critiques of the association's operations and the discourse around race and difference in the larger field. Their assessments and their accompanying demands for change were responsible for major changes in how the association was run and whose voices were included in those discussions. The strategies Black women used during their struggles with and within the NWSA reflect their larger critiques of academia. Black women were the force behind much of the institutional and canonical transformation within the university during his period. I argue that the changes Black women enacted in the NWSA through repeated speeches, protests, and public demands were a microcosm of how they propelled a paradigm shift around race and gender in the academy during this time.

#### *Black Women and the NWSA, 1979-1990*

Women's Studies as a discipline first emerged in the 1960s as a part of the student-driven movements for more diverse curriculum that emerged out of various social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation

Movement. By the time the intention to form a national professional association was established in 1973, the number of women's studies programs and courses in the United States had quickly ballooned from almost none to an impressive collection of offerings at a variety of institutions. By 1972, there were 46 women's studies programs in the United States and upwards of one thousand women's studies courses.<sup>294</sup> In the 1970s this network of programs and scholars were connected by a nationally distributed publication, *The Women's Studies Newsletter*, which was published by the Feminist Press and ran from 1972 through 1981, whereupon it became *Women's Studies Quarterly*. This move marked the publication's transition from what had at first been a slim collection of essays, news updates, and shared resources, cataloguing the rapidly expanding field, to a professional academic journal.

Writing in 1976, Elsa Greene attributed the original idea for a national association to Catharine Stimpson in 1973. She went on to ponder the benefits of a national association for women's studies and wonders why one still has not been organized.<sup>295</sup> At this time it appears that there were local and regional women's studies organizations holding conferences and performing other duties, these organizations were to be connected to each other by the national organization. Greene writes of a "national" conference being planned by the women at San Jose State University, what would eventually become the "inaugural conference" held. Although the NWSA did not exist as such when that conference took place, it activated the communication networks necessary

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<sup>294</sup> Howe, Florence. "On the Campus." *Women's Studies Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (1972): 2.

<sup>295</sup> Greene, Elsa. "The Case for a National Women's Studies Association," *Women's Studies Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (1976): 1, 3.



to organize such a large conference and affirmed the desire for such large-scale gatherings of feminist scholars, activists, and teachers.

On March 20<sup>th</sup>, thirty women met in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to draft a plan for the founding of national women's studies association. This national planning meeting was inspired by the San Jose State women's plan and funded by the Ford Foundation.<sup>296</sup> Delegates drafted the NWSA constitution during the 1977 conference at the University of San Francisco. At the same time as the constitution, the Third World Women's Caucus drafted a resolution establishing itself as a permanent member of the coordinating committee and a space for Third World Women.<sup>297</sup>

I choose to focus on the NWSA because it is a national organization, which brought together the most feminist women, especially feminist academics, in the United States of any organization at the time. The NWSA is notable for the explicit inclusion of Third World women in its original organization. The Third World Women's caucus was one of their original caucuses in the organization. Because of, women of color, including and, I argue especially, Black women, viewed the NWSA as more accepting of them than other academic professional organizations.

Most professional academic organizations had already largely failed women, especially women of color, as far as the allocation of resources and attention. For example, the MLA's Committee on Women in the Profession had only two women of color on its board: Barbara Smith and Gloria "Akasha" Hull. The only reason the

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<sup>296</sup> Greene, Elsa. "Planning a National Women's Studies Association," *Women's Studies Newsletter* 4, no. 2 (1976): 1, 10-11.

<sup>297</sup> *Women's Studies Newsletter* 5, no. 1/2 (1977): 6-10.

committee had more than one women of color was because Smith had threatened to resign if they did not add another. She nominated Hull and the committee appointed her in 1976.<sup>298</sup> The MLA's Committee on Women was only able to affect minimal change in the organization's priorities and offerings at the conference. In doing so, they also were unable or unwilling to engage meaningfully with the concerns of women of color. The Berkshires Women's History Conference, commonly known as the Berks, had been a productive experience for women of color. Lorde first presented her paper "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" at the Berks in 1978. But the Berks was a smaller conference, meeting only once every three years, and had a focus on history, theoretically leaving little space for the many literary critics who worked in Women's Studies. So when the NWSA was founded, it was seen as a beacon of hope. For women, by women, potentially free of the sexism that characterized traditional professional organizations. Unfortunately, for Third World Women this promise did not come to fruition.

The first NWSA convention was held over four days, May 30 to June 3, at the University of Kansas, Lawrence in 1979. Over 1,000 participants attended. Many viewed the first convention as a triumph and enjoyed their time there. Women in attendance praised the format as being "different from other professional associations...closer in format and feel to the various women's groups of which [they had been] a part."<sup>299</sup> Others praised the sessions on scholarly research and "the nuts-and-bolts development of

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<sup>298</sup> Smith, Barbara. "Building Black Women's Studies" in *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from 30 Founding Mothers*, ed. Florence Howe (New York: The Feminist Press, 2000), 200-201. Smith herself had been nominated to the committee in 1974 by Nancy Hoffman.

<sup>299</sup> Fitzgerald, Ann. "'Going National' Together," *Women's Studies Newsletter* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1979): 10-11.

women's studies courses and programs" as "the most scholarly and the most stimulating meetings I've ever attended." One went so far as to say it was "better than the Berks [The Berkshire Conference on Women's History]" previously the largest scholarly gathering for work on women.<sup>300</sup> Other women were pleased by the social dimension of the meeting. Bonnie Zimmerman described the convention as "an educational experience, a revitalization, and a social event all in one."<sup>301</sup> As a white lesbian, Zimmerman was thrilled by the "*visibility*" of lesbians at the conference. She wrote, "The convention gave us [lesbians in academia] a chance to meet with others doing similar work, to exchange ideas and improve our work, to renew our energy and commitment, to make new friends, and have a good time."<sup>302</sup> What Zimmerman called the "serious, anguished concern throughout the conference over the racism...in the women's movement," does not seem to have affected her much. She devoted only a sentence to it. But for Third World women at the convention, it was the entirety of their experience.

Exact numbers for the demographics at the first NWSA conference are not available, but according to conference evaluations, which 30 percent of attendees submitted, 93 percent of attendees identified as "Anglo."<sup>303</sup> Thus the first NWSA conference was overwhelmingly white. The experiences of non-white women reflect the lack of diversity and inclusiveness both in attendees and in conference offerings. Third World Women levied critiques about the structure of the conference and the beliefs and

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<sup>300</sup> Howe, Florence. "Editorial: The Convention Issue: A Time to Reflect and to Look Ahead," *Women's Studies Newsletter* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1979): 2.

<sup>301</sup> Zimmerman, Bonnie. "NWSA Convention." *Thursday's Child*, Aug. 1979, p. 5.

<sup>302</sup> *ibid*

<sup>303</sup> Patricia A. Frech and Barbara Hillyer Davis, "The NWSA Constituency: Evaluation of 1979 Conference Participation." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1980), 68.

behavior of specific individuals and exhibitors, which they believed reflected the persistent racism within organization and the women's movement as a whole. For example, the *New Women's Times* also reported that approximately twenty Black women walked out of the opening session, "when the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was cited as something to celebrate. This legislation made Kansas and Nebraska territories of the U.S., but also gave white settlers in those territories the right to vote for themselves on the issue of slavery. The Territories were no longer a safe haven for escaping slaves."<sup>304</sup> These Black women were protesting the apparent celebration of the perpetuation of slavery or at least the ignorance of the white women who did not understand that what they were doing was problematic. Throughout the convention white women enacted similar quotidian racist behavior without realizing it, which deeply upset the Third World women in attendance.

Nupur Chaudhuri's essay "A Third World Women's View of the Convention," which was published in the *Women's Studies Newsletter* alongside other coverage of the conference outlined other negative experiences Third World women had at the conference. In addition to complaints about too many concurrent sessions detracting attention and engagement from sessions about Third World women's issues, Chaudhuri claimed that Third World women in attendance were treated poorly by white women. She wrote, "Man Americans of color found themselves congratulated for speaking good English or having a grasp of the subject matter. These kinds of comments were undoubtedly intended as compliments, but most of us felt they were simply 'pats on the

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<sup>304</sup> Karen A. Hagberg, "Racism Charged at NWSA Conference," *New Women's Times* 5, no. 15 (1979): 10-11

head.’ Similar kinds of condescending attitudes sometimes surfaced in the sessions.” She concluded with the hope that the next conference will feature “a climate which is culturally enlightened and sensitive to diversity.”<sup>305</sup>

Articles on the conference in both *off our backs* and *New Women’s Times* echoed this interpretation of the conference. Both referenced an incident in which a white South African woman claimed that her country saw relative gender equality. When no American white women objected to her elision of Black women and the ongoing apartheid regime, a Black American woman attendee became upset. The *New Women’s Times* reported,

Marie Angelique Savane of Senegal told [the paper] later that she felt the South African woman was there for propaganda purposes—her remarks had nothing to do with international research on women or women’s studies—yet white women on the panel entertained the remarks as if they were appropriate. After that session, angry Black women (with a growing number of white sympathizers) claimed that the conferment did not represent them. One woman said, “This is the National *White* Women’s Studies Conference, and we’re here by invitation.’ On the following day, a ‘model’ introductory course in women’s studies was outlined in a session set up for that purpose. There were no units on Third World Women included at all.<sup>306</sup>

*off our backs* also detailed conflicts at the convention:

An American Black woman began to speak and stated that she did not know if she could articulate what she must say because she was so upset. She asked Gerdes

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<sup>305</sup> Chaudhuri, Nupur. “A Third World Women’s View of the Convention,” *Women’s Studies Newsletter* 7, no. 3 (1979): 5-6.

<sup>306</sup> Hagberg 10

how Gerdes could even begin to discuss ‘women’s rights’ in a country that doesn’t begin to recognize the most basic of human rights? She was angered that none of the white women in the room had seriously challenged Gerdes. A woman said it bothered her that Geres was speaking about ‘all women’ when she really only meant and assumed white women. Gerdes was ‘caught up in a verbal delusions.’...An American Black woman said that within this entire discussion we must not forget the racism in the U.S. and the in the conference itself. All the women in the planning positions were white, they held the conference in a place inaccessible to minority and low-income women and very few minority women were there. She described how this personally felt to her—alienating and frustrating.<sup>307</sup>

There was also a protest in reaction to a display for the Agency for International Development (AID) in the exhibit area. According to the *New Women’s Times*, “Protesters charged that A.I.D. practices coercive population control in Third World countries and that it protects American business interests abroad under the guise of giving ‘assistance’ to unindustrialized countries...The protesters proposed that in the future the NWSA prohibit the participation of institutions whose policies conflict with those of the Association.”<sup>308</sup>

Black feminist critic Barbara Smith addressed the tensions around race during the final session of the conference. The final panel was devoted to “summing up and looking ahead at the end of the First NWSA Convention...[speakers] were asked to reflect on

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<sup>307</sup> west, lois a. “a conference sampler,” *off our backs* 9, no. 8 (1979): 12.

<sup>308</sup> Hagberg 1; Specifically attendees object to the “the presence of the Agency for International Development (AID) which had a disgustingly ostentatious booth in the exhibitor’s area. Many women felt AID should not be there because it represented American imperialism. A Black African woman closed with a statement that she was incensed by the South African woman’s comments, but had been waiting for the American women to speak out in protest. She said she was angered, but not surprised that it was a Black American woman who spoke out first. The Third World Caucus raised many of the issues and problems later in the Delegate Assembly, but a number of problems, like the use of AID money to pay for the attendance of many non-U.S. women, were never addressed.”

their work of the early '70s and to offer their analyses—and their visions—for the '80s.”<sup>309</sup> The other panelists were Elaine Reuben, the National Coordinator of the NWSA, Florence Howe, the editor of the *Women's Studies Newsletter*, Charlotte Bunch, the editor of *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*, Arlie Hochschild, an instructor at UC-Berkeley, and Amy Swerdlow, who taught history and women's studies at Livingston College, Rutgers University. They offered their thoughts on a range of broad issues related to women's studies including institutional backlash and building feminist community. Smith's talk, later reprinted with the title “Racism and Women's Studies,” sharply contrasted in tone and content with that of the other panelists.

Smith began her statement with a mea culpa: “Although my proposed topic is Black women's studies, I have decided to focus my remarks in a different way. Given that this is a gathering of predominantly white women and given what has occurred during this conference, it makes much more sense to discuss the issue of racism: racism in women's studies and racism in the women's movement generally.”<sup>310</sup> She continued by insisting that, despite what some of the women in attendance might think, they have not spent the previous days of the conference seriously discussing or engaging with the issue of racism in the women's movement. Smith says, “If it had been all we had talked about since we got here, we might be at a point of radical transformation on the last day of this Conference that we clearly are not.”

Smith used her talk as an opportunity to explain why racism is a feminist issue

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<sup>309</sup> “Visions and Revisions: Women and the Power to Change,” *Women's Studies Newsletter* 7, No. 3 (Summer 1979): 18-22.

<sup>310</sup> Barbara Smith, “Racism and Women's Studies,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 5, no.1 (Spring 1980): 48.

and how the confrontation of racism within the NWSA and the larger women's movement was crucial to the success of both. Smith argued that racism is an issue within the women's movement and in women's studies, "because of it being raised in the women's generally, but also because women's studies is a context in which white and Third World women actually come together, a context that should be about studying and learning about all of our lives."<sup>311</sup> According to Smith then because white and Third World women most often interact in feminist spaces, like the convention, it was both appropriate and necessary to tackle issues of racism in the feminist community and especially within the NWSA.

Smith exhorted her majority white audience, "white women don't work on racism to do a favor for someone else, to solely benefit Third World women. You have got to comprehend how racism distorts and lessens your own lives as white women, that racism affects your chances for survival too and that is very definitely your issue."<sup>312</sup> Again Smith framed fighting racism as both necessary for interracial feminist solidarity and as an essential part of the project of feminism, fighting oppression and inequality everywhere.

Although she acknowledged the steps that had been taken to diversify women's studies curricula by including women of color, Smith insisted that this was not sufficient. Instead she said, "The stage we're at now is having to decide to change fundamental attitudes and behavior, the way people treat each other. In other words, we're at a stage of

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> *ibid*



having to take some frightening risks.”<sup>313</sup> The approach Smith advocated for must be enacted on the level of the individual and the system. On the level of the individual, she asked white women “To look at how you still believe yourself to be superior to Third World women and how you communicate these attitudes in blatant and subtle ways.” At the level of the field of women’s studies and the organization of the NWSA, Smith believed a commitment to anti-racism must accompany the rejection of “the pernicious ideology of professionalism.” Smith criticizes “what [she] call[s] women’s studies or academic feminists. Women who teach, research, and publish about women but who are not involved in any way in making radical social can political change, women who are not involved in making the lives of living breathing women more viable.” Rather than focus on ascending in the academic hierarchy, Smith encouraged feminist scholars to think about how their work “will lift oppression off to not only women, but all oppressed people.” Anything short of that casts doubt on whether one is a “a part of the actual feminist movement.”

Smith’s talk was a call both to individual members and the NWSA as an organization to reflect on how they unwittingly perpetuated and engaged in racist behavior and beliefs. Her speech reflected the frustration and hurt of Third World women who attended the inaugural convention of the NWSA and anticipated how the organization and its members would be forced to reckon with racism in feminism and women’s studies in the future.

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<sup>313</sup> *ibid* 49

At the 1980 convention, held in Bloomington, Indiana, there were just as few Third World Women. Demographics data collected by conference organizers showed that attendees were still over 90 percent “Caucasian,” with 3 percent each identifying at “Black” or “Native American,” 1.8 percent at “Hispanic”, and .9 percent as “Asian.”<sup>314</sup> The continued low attendance of women of color led the NWSA to choose “Women Confronting Racism” as the theme for the 1981 convention. Even in its infancy, the Association was anxious about serving the needs of its diverse membership. The demographic data I cite was originally collected as part of a project to catalog and quantify the significance of write-in comments from conference evaluations in 1979 and 1980. Barbara Hillyer Davis and Patricia A. Frech published their findings in *Women’s Quarterly* in 1981.

Davis and Frech framed these comments as being primarily about diversity in that, ““The emphasis on diversity is most often expressed in demands for more—or a different quality of—attention to the needs of particular constituency groups.” The report details complaints about the lack of activities of support for several groups—including coordinators of women’s studies programs, Jewish women, and social scientists—and the Association’s subsequent actions to address these concerns. Surprisingly, race and racism are almost entirely absent from their analysis. A large section of the article is devoted to detailing controversies about the visibility of lesbians and sessions on lesbianism, but race and racism are only addressed in regards to two comments about the entertainment at

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<sup>314</sup> “National Women’s Studies Association 1980 Conference Demographic Data.” September 8, 1980. National Women’s Studies Association Papers. Series XII, Box 2. University of Maryland. College Park, MD. Because apparently only 56 percent of attendees responded this data is potentially incomplete or misleading.

the 1980 conference. Otherwise race and racism are the unmarked reasons for “unacceptable” sessions and talks and frequent walkouts from sessions, panels, and performances.

Davis and Frech claimed, “The Association and—to judge from these responses [to conference evaluations]—its members are fully committed to including an extremely diverse group of members,” neither the content of their article nor the Association’s actions bear this out. Ironically, several respondents to the conference evaluation apparently wrote, “They [women who disagreed with me] made me feel like an oppressed minority.” Davis and Frech attributed these types of conflicts to “The ideological split that exists among liberals, socialists, radicals, etc.” Although the specter of racism is raised by the image of the “oppressed minority,” the concerns of constituents who are actually oppressed racial minorities remains unaddressed until the very end of the essay when “women of color” are mentioned only once: “The selection of racism as the 1981 conference theme may represent a significant step toward including concerns of women of color in the process of all sessions of the conference and thus may be one model for opening communication between groups.” But Davis and Frech’s data seems to trouble the usefulness of this move. They wrote that constituents’ complaints were “evidently not assuaged by scheduling many and diverse sessions” and “Such anxiety needs to be *directly* addressed.” (emphasis added)<sup>315</sup> Their words foreshadowed how the NWSA’s attempt to address tensions around race and racism at the 1981 conference would fall short.

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<sup>315</sup> Davis and Frech

The NWSA's 1981 annual conference was held in Storrs, Connecticut on the University of Connecticut campus. The promise of intense, cross-racial dialogue and consciousness-raising groups drew a diverse and large group of participants. Three hundred women of color attended the Storrs conference, making up approximately 23 percent of conference participants.<sup>316</sup> Because of the theme, women of color were cautiously hopeful that the conference would remedy the failings of earlier meetings and create space for women to seriously engage with issues of race and racism.<sup>317</sup> Unfortunately, decisions made by the organizers ultimately prevented such conversations from happening.

Like Smith's talk in 1979, the dual keynotes delivered by Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich at the 1981 conference laid out the importance of confronting racism within Women's Studies and the larger Feminist movement. Both speakers linked their lives, what they had witnessed in feminist organizing, and anti-racist theory to demonstrate how racism was a feminist issue, while also using the opportunity to speak about the importance of recognizing and respecting all kinds of difference within the feminist movement.

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<sup>316</sup>Phyllis Ham Garth, "A Time for Truth: Women of Color and the National Women's Studise Association: A Critical Ethnographic Analysis," *Every Voice Counts...: Proceedings of the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual African American and Latino/a American Adult Education Research Symposium*, April 21, 2001, 71. But there was also a drop in overall conference attendance, which decreased from 1,800 in 1980 to 1,300 in 1981 (See Sandoval). But this could also perhaps be attributed to the rural location and difficulty of traveling to Storrs, Connecticut.

<sup>317</sup> Sandoval writes, "Feminists of color reported that the impetus for completing such a journey lay in the yearning (created by years of educational, political and community work) to confront the 'women's' liberation movement with the anger, frustration, cynicism, and hope that these years had inspired."

In her talk, “Disobedience Is What the NWSA Is Potentially About,” Rich critiqued how Women’s Studies had diverged from its radical beginnings as “a grassroots political movement with roots in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.”<sup>318</sup> She likened the field to a rebellious daughter who had “matured into the dutiful daughter of the white, patriarchal university.”<sup>319</sup> According to Rich, instead of fighting against the status quo, Women’s Studies had begun to embrace it. As such, Rich framed the 1980s as a decisive decade for the field, asking, “[H]ow disobedient will Women’s Studies be in the 1980s: how will this Association address the racism, misogyny, homophobia, of the university, and the corporate society in which it is embedded; and how will white feminist scholars and teachers and studies practice disobedience to patriarchy?”<sup>320</sup> Rich outlined a radical vision for the next decade of women’s studies as a field and the NWSA as an organization. A successful resistance to the disciplining forces of the white, heteropatriarchal academy would, she argued, necessitate purposeful ongoing work on the part of its practitioners, especially white women.

Rich’s keynote called upon white women to interrogate their role in perpetuating inequality, racism, and homophobia. Her speech drew heavily from both Winnie Bruce Pratt’s reflection on white femininity’s complicity in maintaining white supremacy and Michele Russell’s critique of white women feminists in the academy, quoting extensively

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<sup>318</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Disobedience Is What NWSA Is Potentially about.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1981), 4.

<sup>319</sup> *ibid*

<sup>320</sup> *ibid*

from both pieces.<sup>321</sup> Rich also spoke about her own experiences as a white lesbian coming to terms with the reality that, “so long as we can identify only with white women, we are still connected to that system of objectification and callousness and cruelty called racism.”<sup>322</sup> In order to successfully overcome this solipsistic blindness, white women would need to engage in self-reflection and also engage meaningfully with women of color. Rich used her own experience of realizing that she was complicit in the oppressive system of white supremacy if she did not actively oppose it as a model for her audience. She described how she had previously believed that because she was a “not a carrier of racism” because of her liberal activism and beliefs. However, Rich eventually realized that she still had work to do. She explicitly links her commitment to feminism to her ability to confront her racism, saying, “Feminism became a political and spiritual base from which I could move to examine rather than try to hide my own racism, recognize that I have antiracist work to do continuously within myself.”<sup>323</sup> This “antiracist work” includes reading “the writings of contemporary lesbian and feminist women of color which have moved and challenged [her] to push [her] horizons further.”<sup>324</sup> Rich says this process is ongoing:

I need to be constantly checking, between my beliefs and standards for myself, and how I still think and act as a daughter of white patriarchy. If I say that I am trying to recognize and change in myself certain failure to see or hear, certain failures to see or hear, certain kinds of arrogance, ignorance, passivity, which

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<sup>321</sup> See Minnie Bruce Pratt, “Rebellion,” *Feminary* II: 1 and 2 (1981): 6-20 and Michele Russell, “An Open Letter to the Academy,” in Bunch et. al., eds., *Building Feminist Theory: Essays from Quest, A Feminist Quarterly* (New York and London: Longman, 1981): 101-10.

<sup>322</sup> *ibid* 4

<sup>323</sup> *ibid* 6

<sup>324</sup> *ibid*

have to do with living in a white skin, that is, which have to do with racism, I can say this as a woman committed to the love of women, including love for myself.<sup>325</sup>

Anti-racism is more than doing anti-racist work as an activist or teacher, it also includes self-reflection. Rich portrays this internal work as integral to her work and identity as a lesbian and a feminist. Working “to recognize and change in [herself] certain failures [in regards to race and racism]” is a necessary part of her feminism.

Lorde’s talk, “The Uses of Anger,” also addressed the necessity of anti-racist work and self-reflection but did so from her position as a woman of color who had experienced racism in the larger world and within feminist spaces as well. Lorde used the conference’s theme “Women Respond to Racism” as a jumping off point, revealing, “My response to racism is anger... Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight of that anger. My fear of that anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, also.”<sup>326</sup> She continued, “Women responding to racism means women responding to anger, the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and coopting.”<sup>327</sup> Thus Lorde framed the mission of the conference as dealing with each other’s fear and anger. Like Rich, she argues that ignoring the reality of racism in the women’s movement will not help eradicate it. Lorde takes aim at the racist behavior of white women in academia in particular, listing a series of racist incidents involving white women scholars she has

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<sup>325</sup> *ibid*

<sup>326</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1981), 7.

<sup>327</sup> *ibid*

witnessed or been subject to. Lorde uses concrete examples that occurred within the space of the academy because, as she says, “We are not here as women examining racism in a political and social vacuum.”<sup>328</sup>

According to Lorde, anger is not an impediment to fighting racism but rather a resource that can help bridge the divide between white women and women of color if we let it. She rejects white women’s usual responses to women of color’s anger as counter productive. Lorde says,

When women of Color speak out of anger that laces so many of our contacts with white woman, we are often told that we are ‘creating a mood of hopelessness,’ ‘preventing white women from getting past guilt,’ or ‘standing in the way of trusting communication and action’ All these quotes come directly from letters to me from members of this organization within the last two years...To turn aside from the anger of Black women with excuses or the pretexts of intimidation, is to award no one power—it is merely another way of preserving racial blindness, the power of unaddressed privilege, unbreached, intact...<sup>329</sup>

Refusing to listen to and recognize others’ experiences prevents women from confronting racism. Lorde says, “It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us, but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment.”<sup>330</sup> Only by confronting racism as the conference’s title commands, will the women gathered be able to effectively deal with racism, both their own and each

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<sup>328</sup> *ibid* 8

<sup>329</sup> *ibid* 9

<sup>330</sup> *ibid*



other's. Rich ends her talk with an invitation to join women of color in confronting racism: "We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt."<sup>331</sup>

The significance of Rich and Lorde's messages lay not only in their words but also in their identities. Two lesbian poets, one Black, the other white, coming together to encourage the diverse group of women at the conference to take on the difficult task of confronting racism. Their friendship and mutual respect as well as Rich's already established commitment to facilitating conversations about race and racism with other white feminists made the two speeches, couple together particularly powerful. Lorde and Rich modeled in their words and their actions by sharing the keynote how white and nonwhite women could come together to successfully struggle with difficult issues. Unfortunately the conference was unable to live up to the mission set forth by Lorde and Rich's keynotes.

The first issue was the structure of the conference, which drew immediate disapproval from women of color. The schedule was arranged so that each attendee chose a CR group that fit her identity. Groups were arranged so that Third World women were relegated to separate groups, away from working class, white, and straight women. This choice effectively treated all women of color as one homogenous, monolithic group, failing to recognize the differences between them. In arranging the groups this way, NWSA also failed to acknowledge how race intersected with other identity categories,

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<sup>331</sup> *ibid* 10

seemingly believing that only white women were affected by issues like sexuality, class, and motherhood.<sup>332</sup>

This format did not just group all women of color together, it also separated them from the white women at the conference; “Women of Color were isolated into consciousness raising groups for Third World Women only, negating their diversity.”<sup>333</sup> Instead of pushing white women to engage more meaningfully with racism and the diversity within the feminist movement, the conference organizers inadvertently created a dynamic in which white women were insulated from challenges to their own worldviews. Separated from each other the conference attendees could not work together to confront racism as Lorde had called them to do. The relegation of women of color to their own groups was, in effect, a “ghettoi[zation]” of their cohort.<sup>334</sup>

Attendees also criticized the format of the conference as hindering sustained engagement with difficult issues and community-building. In the report on the conference that was later commissioned by a group of Third World women, Chela Sandoval argues that the conference offerings were both too many and inconsistent. Because every proposal had been accepted, the quality of presentations varied widely. Sandoval writes, “Although an abundance of presentations on ‘racism’ were available, few were able to advance our understandings of racism and engender unity among us. Mounting frustration or numbness were the result of being herded from one workshop to another

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<sup>332</sup> Chela Sandoval, “Feminism and racism: A report on the 1981 National Women’s Studies Association Conference,” in *Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), 54.

<sup>333</sup> *ibid*

<sup>334</sup> Garth 72

while missing the most meaningful presentations.”<sup>335</sup> Thus, “Efforts to confront other kinds of racism were dissipated in the apparent abundance of opportunities to do so.”<sup>336</sup> Although there was an “abundance” of sessions, there was little time scheduled to allow for reflection or for the attendees to meet as a collective, outside the delegates meeting on the final day of the conference. Sandoval likes the conference atmosphere to a “shopping mall,” impersonal and unorganized, the opposite of a feminist conference on “Confronting Racism” should have been.

Actions by NWSA officials also undercut the conference’s stated mission. Speeches and statements from association staff and leaders shaped the terms by which attendees could engage in the conference’s stated mission of “confronting racism.” Sandoval argues,

These speeches moderated and restrained discussions of racism by invoking the imperatives of a higher order, the ‘survival’ of the organization itself: a new chairperson had to be found, the constitution had to be revised, and the inevitable financial problems had to be solved. The official response to racism soon became: Remember, the NWSA *is* dealing with racism by sponsoring this conference: what would it be like if the NWSA was not around?; ‘The NWSA, after all, can’t be everything to everybody’; ‘Is separatism within the NWSA a luxury we can afford?’ Such messages oversaw and guided the imagination of the meanings of racism into permissible areas.<sup>337</sup>

By insisting that the possibilities of addressing racism within the organization were inherently limited by financial and logistical realities, NWSA officials stifled critiques of

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<sup>335</sup> Sandoval 68

<sup>336</sup> *ibid* 58

<sup>337</sup> *ibid* 58-59

the conference and the organization itself. They attempted to inculcate themselves and the organization from censure by limiting how racism could be discussed. Officials' decision to make "no exceptions" to the registration fee, which was prohibitively expensive for some potential presenters, further limited discussion. As Lorde noted in her talk, "This has made it impossible for many women of Color—for instance, Wilmette Brown, of Black Women for Wages for Housework—to participate in this Convention."<sup>338</sup> Poor women and women of color, who could have contributed greatly to the conference proceedings were shut out in the name of the organization's "survival" and to the detriment of its statement mission.<sup>339</sup>

Although the structure of the conference, in particular the "abundance" of workshops and the segregation women of color into one CR group prevented meaningful dialogue in the larger conference, it created a "conference within a conference" in which Third World women *were* able to "confront racism." Ironically the segregation of women of color into a separate 'conference within a conference' allowed them to explore and address issues of racism as they pertained to white women and to wrestle with how non-Black women of color were often rendered invisible by the narrow dimensions of the discourse around racism in the women's movement, which only recognized Black/white women.<sup>340</sup> Sandoval described that although at first the three hundred women of color were wary of each other, the two hours spent at the beginning of each day in their "consciousness-raising" group was "the most effective place to work; to challenge

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<sup>338</sup> Lorde 8

<sup>339</sup> Sandoval 58-59

<sup>340</sup> *ibid* 60-63

‘racism;’ to discuss what it has been, is, and might become; to discuss the previous ‘women’s’ movement and the kind of liberatory movements possible in the future.”<sup>341</sup>

The women used their daily meeting to do the critical work that the larger conference was supposed to facilitate. In addition to thinking about and articulating their own WOC feminism(s), the WOC CR group developed an assessment of the conference and recommendations to improve future NWSA conventions.

Once the WOC CR group decided that they wanted to present their recommendations to the larger conference at the Delegate Assembly on the final day of the conference, they arranged a “coalition meeting” with “interested white women” to “communicate our mutual discoveries, listen to each other’s positions, evaluate the conference, and collectively decide on a plan of action.” The meeting was successful, accomplishing what the larger conference had not: “The approximately two hundred women who attended (comprised equally of women of color and white women) became an energetic and committed gathering, which provided its participants an opportunity to heal the blistering divisions.”<sup>342</sup> The interracial coalition meeting not only produced a set of resolutions that was presented to the Delegate Assembly the next day, but also facilitated intellectual and spiritual communion across difference, which had been part of the conference’s original goals.

The list of resolutions was extensive, enumerating the critiques of the conference’s structure, planning, and implementation that have been outlined above.

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<sup>341</sup> *ibid* 63

<sup>342</sup> *ibid* 69

Ultimately, the Third World Caucus/Women of Color “CR” group condemned the 1981 Storrs conference as “racist...in its structure, organization, and individual interaction despite its theme.”<sup>343</sup> The resolution essentially called for the NWSA to have a do-over for the 81 conference the following year. The 1982 conference should 1) have the same theme 2) be planned with or by Third World Women and 3) be moved from the currently planned Humboldt, California, which they argued was as rural and isolated as Storrs, to a location more easily accessible and safer for women of color, like Los Angeles.<sup>344</sup>

Despite the productive inter-group collaboration that had produced the list of recommendations, it was not well-received by the Delegate Assembly. According to Sandoval,

Many of the white Delegates had spent a week of boredom and alienation sitting through too many lectures on women of color—they had ‘put in their time.’ For them, the issue of racism was worn to the bone. By the last Assembly meeting most delegates were ready to move onto, as they called it ‘more pressing issues.’ The continued ‘haranguing’ by the third world delegates was seen as ‘idiosyncratic,’ ‘selfish,’ and as ‘unnecessarily divisive to the movement.’ The resolution was not passed.<sup>345</sup>

White women Delegates who had not been at the coalition meeting rejected the Women of Color group’s demands both because they believed that the conference, by its existence, had successfully addressed “the issue of racism in the women’s movement” and because they believed other matters were “more pressing.” This reaction, as Sandoval

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<sup>343</sup> Sandoval 69

<sup>344</sup> *ibid*

<sup>345</sup> *ibid*

notes, was not entirely unsurprising given that it was from the governing body responsible in part for organizing the deeply flawed conference in the first place.

What had begun as an attempt by the NWSA to remedy its lackluster record addressing race and racism, ended as a failure. Rather than bridging the painful divisions wrought by difference, as Lorde had exhorted attendees to do, “by the end of the conference the division between third world and white women had intensified and cemented with antagonism. It was an ironic ending to a movement conference on racism.”<sup>346</sup> Although the conference concluded with coalition building and united action between WOC and white women, the damage done by the conference’s structure and the planners’ apparent lack of commitment to deep, open engagement with difficult issues were disappointing.

The issues that plagued the 1981 conference continued to trouble the 1982 NWSA annual conference. Despite objections, the 1982 conference was held at Humboldt State University in Arcadia, California, approximately 300 miles outside of San Francisco. The conference’s theme was “Feminist Connections Through Education” but the difficulty of forming connections across difference persisted. For example, the issues of access that Third World women had brought up at the ’81 meeting affected the ’82 conference. As a result of a combination of a difficult to access location and the negative experiences of many women of color in 1981, the attendance of women of color at the 1982 conference dropped from about 300 at the ’81 meeting to only about 30 women of color in 1981. Unofficial coverage of the conference in feminist periodicals alluded to the difficulty and

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<sup>346</sup> *ibid* 70

expense of traveling to the remote location.<sup>347</sup> As women of color had predicted, holding the conference at Humboldt evidently prevented and/or discouraged women of color from attending.

The association's financial woes continued to shape its policies and how the annual conference was conducted. No attendance fees were waived for low income conferees, and organizers required participants to display official badges in order to be admitted to conference workshops. This policy was so strictly enforced that the opening plenary was delayed with Angela Davis, a principal speaker, was initially denied entrance because of a failure to "produce the proper badge."<sup>348</sup> Over-scheduling was still an issue at the '82 meeting. Coverage of the conference in the feminist periodical *Kinesis* noted, the abundance of choices for each session and the difficulty of choosing amongst them.<sup>349</sup> The official coverage of the conference in *Women's Studies Quarterly* belied the numerous issues. In the section recapping the annual conference, an entire page is devoted to describing "the setting" at Humboldt, including the "coastal fog," beautiful redwood trees, and even the artisanal glycerin soap gifted to early registrants.<sup>350</sup> The official narrative largely ignored any controversies and critiques of the conference.

But Deborah Rosenfelt's summary of political issues in *WSQ* did address some of the political debates that frequently characterized NWSA conferences, admitting "this forum was no exception." But she insists, "[her] impression is that the atmosphere on the

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<sup>347</sup> The campus's hilly terrain also made it difficult to navigate for women with disabilities.

<sup>348</sup> Helen Stewart, "Conference Aims for Feminist Connections," *Plexus* (Aug. 1982), 7.

<sup>349</sup> Cy-Thea Sand, "Conference for Unity in Diversity," *Kinesis* (Sept. 1982), 18.

<sup>350</sup> Nancy Osbourne, "Views of the 1982 Convention: The Setting," *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol. 10, no. 3 (1982): 3-4.



whole was less fraught with controversy and controversy than was the case [in 1982].”<sup>351</sup> Rosenfelt’s contribution recognized how debates about international issues, specifically the recent invasion of Lebanon by Israel, as well as how “the political climate has enabled serious attacks on women’s studies in some areas of the country.” However her discussion of what she calls issues related to “NWSA’s internal affairs” is thin. Echoing the NWSA party line from the previous year, she emphasizes the importance of the association’s survival and the need for “practical” support and policy, “whatever the issues that divide us [as women.]”<sup>352</sup>

Davis’s keynote, in contrast to Catherine Stimpsons’ introduction, which lauded the positive influence of Women’s Studies on society, focused on the difficult work of confronting racism by asserting the importance of recognizing the racial history of the Women’s Movement. Davis drew on the arguments from her monograph *Women, Race, & Class*, which had been published the previous year to outline histories and figures from the history of the women’s movement that much of her audience was not familiar with. Davis’s talk went all the way back to the 1848 Seneca Falls convention in order to highlight how the contributions and concerns of nonwhite and working-class and poor women had largely been erased from the record. In discussing how issues of difference that continue to exist in the women’s movement have existed from its inception, Davis invited her audience to consider the content and significance of Sojourner Truth’s infamous 1851 speech in Akron, Ohio. She used Truth’s speech, her ability “to speak

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<sup>351</sup> Deborah Rosenfelt, “Views of the 1982 Convention: Politics,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* vol. 10, no. 3 (1982): 4.

<sup>352</sup> *ibid*

more effectively for all the women there than those women could speak for themselves, because of the political experiences she had accumulated,” to illustrate how the fight for women’s issues must center the voices of those women “who have the most to gain: working-class women and women of color.”<sup>353</sup>

Davis’s message was strikingly similar to that of Rich and Lorde’s in 1981. She told the audience,

It is important for white women who are involved in the women’s movement to take note of the degree to which the experiences of working-class women and women of color are valid for the entire women’s movement. It is important to stop accepting the divisions and gaps the assumption that there can be a ‘white, middle-class women’s movement.’ There cannot be a white middle-class women’s movement that is going to accomplish anything of lasting value.<sup>354</sup>

Davis went on to encourage white women to “challeng[e] racism within the women’s movement” and linked contemporary Black liberation and Civil Rights struggles to the women’s movement. By embracing anti-racism, she argued, the women’s movement could contribute positively to the larger movements for equality in the United States and around the world. In her talk, Davis posts anti-racism, economic issues, and nuclear disarmament as all being necessary components of the women’s movement’s politics.

She concluded her talk by calling on white, middle-class women to work actively to diversify the movement and think deeply about their own politics. She says,

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<sup>353</sup> Angela Davis, “Women, Race, and Class: An Activist Perspective,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1982): 7.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid 8

Ask yourself, whenever you begin to talk about a women's issue, what is the perspective of a woman of color? Do not assume that working-class women and women of color are going to flock to what they see as basically a white, middle-class women's movement. That is not going to happen. Do not assume that all you have to do is invite them and they will come. That will not happen because they are all too conscious of the detrimental influence of racism...It is *your* responsibility—*our* responsibility—to acquire the kind of consciousness that will allow us to create a strong, militant, solid, united movement for the liberation of all women.<sup>355</sup>

Davis's keynote issued a radical challenge to conferees. She used her talk at the NWSA conference to critique the current state of affairs of both the Association and the larger women's movement, a project that women of color, especially Black women, had been involved in since the inaugural conference. But Davis's message, like those of Smith and Lorde before her, was not fully nor successfully taken up by the association.

By 1983, the NWSA had managed to repay its debts and was on more secure financial ground. As a somewhat melodramatic blurb titled "NWSA Lives!" in *Feminist Studies* noted, "NWSA had dug its way out of a financial hole and could imagine a future again."<sup>356</sup> This future was represented by the 1983 convention at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. The theme of the fifth annual conference as "Feminist Education: Quality and Equality." Attendance reached an all time high of 2000 conferees, although attendance of women of color continued to decline from the previous years. The planners of the 1983 conference did attempt to include issues of interest to women of color. One of the four plenary sessions was titled "Racism and Anti-Semitism in the Women's

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<sup>355</sup> *ibid* 9

<sup>356</sup> "Notes and Letters: Conference Report," *Feminist Studies* vol. 10, no. 2 (1984): 353-357.

Movement” and the cultural and entertainment events<sup>357</sup> included readings by Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, Cherrie Moraga, and Paule Marshall, among other writers. Perhaps the most significant move towards addressing equity and diversity issues in the association was the creation of the Low-Income Convention Scholarship Fund. Despite repeated calls for such a program in previous years, 1983 was the first year that the association offered scholarships for attendees to help defray the cost of traveling to and attending the conference.<sup>358</sup>

Although the official editorial summarizing the conference claimed it was characterized by “a high degree of unity,” the final days of the convention were marred by controversy. The night before the final plenary, there was a racist incident at a coffee house. Merle Woo and other poets were scheduled to give a one-hour reading, beginning at 11pm. The performer preceding them went over her allotted time. According to description of events in *off our backs*, “When the poets asked a technician to allow them to stay long enough to finish a full hour’s reading, they were treated with disrespect. They accused the technician of being racist and sexist; the technician replied that she was not being sexist.”<sup>359</sup> This incident compounded women of color’s frustration with the conference’s continuing lack of diversity. One article about the conference alleged, “Women of color charged that not enough effort had been made to incorporate issues of

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<sup>357</sup> NWSA like many feminist conferences at the time frequently had entertainment—performances, poetry readings, etc. as part of their programs.

<sup>358</sup> Although in the official announcement, the association noted, “we have learned that in order to receive outside support for this fund, the NWSA must organize a structure *within* the Association to demonstration organizational support before outside organizations will follow with contributions of their own.” So it seems that the association’s hand was somewhat forced as far as raising and distributing scholarship money from its own coffers.

<sup>359</sup> alice henry, “Speak-Out, Then Work,” *off our backs*, vol. 13, no. 8 (1983): 6.

concern to them—23 of the 240 scheduled sessions dealt with women of color—and, in general, attendance by white women at those sessions was poor.”<sup>360</sup> In response to both the racist incident and coffee house and the persistence of issues of inclusion within NWSA, a group of women of color and white supporters decided to stage a public protest.

At the end of the final plenary, this group of women approached the microphone and requested to speak. Coverage in *off our backs* described what happened next:

Florence Howe [managing editor of *Women's Studies Quarterly* and a leader within NWSA] told them that the hall was supposed to be cleared immediately but after some debate, the women began to speak and the audience sat down to listen. What followed were a series of short statements about racism at the conference prepared and delivered by an ad-hoc group of women of color and white supporters. Although the catalyzing event had occurred at a coffeehouse the night before, the women speaking made it clear that their protests were directed at the entire conference and the NWSA itself...they also read an evaluation of the 1982 conference which pointed out specific gaps in the conference's approach to anti-racist work. These had not been remedied in the 1983 conference. Though the statements varied in tone, subject, and length, one point became clear: the women speaking felt that the NWSA had had ample time for consciousness-raising with respect to racism and it had made too little progress. If the 1984 conference was to be a step forward, it would only be because members forced the organization to take action.<sup>361</sup>

After about fifteen minutes of testimonials, Howe stood up and demanded that the women stop because staying in the hall past the official end time was costing the association money, which would be better spent elsewhere. Furthermore, she asserted that

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<sup>360</sup> Jan Derosa, “Moving into the World: The 1983 National Women's Studies Association Conference,” *The Gay News-Telegraph*, August 1983, 11.

<sup>361</sup> tricia lootens, “International Feminization of Poverty,” *off our backs* 13, no. 8 (1983): 5.

it would be more appropriate for the group to address their complaints “to the responsible parties.” Many audience members were outraged by Howe’s statement, including her baffling claim that the extra cost of staying in the hall could have been used as part of the Low-Income Convention Scholarship Fund. Some women began chanting, “We are the ones responsible,” insisting that the association take responsibility for its continued failings as a whole. Women of color were yet again taking the Association to task for failing to address racism in its ranks and demanding accountability from leadership and individual members. The incident ended when women, both in the audience and at the microphone, “began to join the groups fleeing the scene or already arguing in the halls.”<sup>362</sup>

Writing for *off our backs*, Tricia Lootens suggests, “the probability of some such scene was inherent in the structure of the conferences.” Over-scheduling, which had plagued the previous conferences, continued to be a problem, leaving “too little free time for serious discussion before the final voting on solutions.” Because of the structure of the schedule, Lootens argues, the only way for the women of color to “to reach a large group of conference participants between the times of their planning meeting on Wednesday morning and the final votes on Thursday’s resolutions” was by speaking at the final plenary. The drama of the incident was heightened by the need to vacate the hall immediately, which had not been necessary for any of the earlier events.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> *ibid*

<sup>363</sup> *ibid*

The discussion about racism and diversity continued at the Speak-Out the next day, prior to the Delegate Assembly. The Speak-Out, which had been a part of previous conferences was planned as an opportunity to discuss individuals' concerns and the resolutions up for voting. The 1983 Speak-Out was dominated by the group of women who had spoken out the day before. They reviewed the events that had catalyzed their protest and presented five demands to the association. The demands were:

1. That there be a woman of color conference held simultaneously in conjunction with next year's NWSA, sponsored by NWSA
2. That NWSA hire a woman full time to organize this conference and respond to what women of color want
3. That there be more workshops addressing activism, not just academic study.
4. That time be set aside for meeting of all the caucuses together
5. That there be a focus on international women of color<sup>364</sup>

Although some conferees voiced concerns about how the proposed separate conference for women of color would promote "separatism," the official call for the "autonomous institute," presented as an "unnumbered recommendation" at the Delegate Assembly was passed. The recommendation called for the creation of an "autonomous institute," "responsible for organizing a portion of the program highlighting these issues which have been inadequately represented in past conferences and which reflect the concerns of the ad-hoc coalition [of women of color, disable women, working-class and poor women, Jewish women, lesbians and students]." <sup>365</sup> What had originally begun as a protest by women of color, resulted in an institute that represented the concerns of various minority

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<sup>364</sup> alice henry, "speak-out, then work," *off our backs* 13, no. 8 (1983): 6.

<sup>365</sup> "Special Programs: Autonomous Institute," 1984 NWSA, Conference Program, *NWSA Papers*, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 8.

groups within NWSA who constituted “A majority of the membership of NWSA,” but whose “concerns...have been inadequately represented in the programming of the National Convention.”<sup>366</sup> It seemed that the association was responding to women of color’s critiques with concrete action.

The group of women who originally staged a protest at the final plenary called themselves an ad-hoc committee. After the resolution supporting an autonomous institute as part of the 1984 NWSA convention was passed, they became a Steering Committee, charged with locating a coordinator for the institute and helping plan the institute’s programming. Despite the association’s purported commitment to the success of the autonomous institute, negotiations over the implementation and funding of the institute were prolonged and contentious. This was primarily due to the association’s apparently desire to maintain control over the institute, despite the recommendation’s assertion that it be autonomous. The association’s attempts to “reneg” on promised funding for the coordinator’s salary and the institute itself also caused consternation on the part of the Steering Committee and their supporters. But the women of color spearheading the initiative refused to cede control of their program to the Association’s leadership.

Conflict with the association began almost immediately, when the 1984 NWSA conference coordinators Katherine E. Kleeman and Carol Virginia Pohli drafted a job description for the position of autonomous institute coordinator without consulting the sponsors of the “Unnumbered Recommendation” and the Steering Committee from that

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<sup>366</sup> “Revised Recommendation,” Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archive, “Autonomous Institute within the 1983 NWSA Conference: Correspondence,” Box 1.



Ad Hoc committee at the 1983 conference. Their July memo addressed to the Steering Committee presented this job description as well as prescribing several other requirements for the autonomous institute coordinator. These requirements included that the autonomous institute coordinator be in residence at Rutgers to work with the other conference coordinators and that she be approved by the Dean of Douglass College. Their memo also stipulated that the agreed upon part-time salary for the autonomous institute coordinator would be \$5300 and would be funded in part by fundraising by the groups who sponsored the original recommendation. The letter also asserted that “the entire NWSA membership should be made aware... [that if these groups] do not succeed in raising supplementary funds to pay the salary of Coordinator #3, then certain features of the NWSA ’84 conference will be eliminated or curtailed in order to fund the position.”<sup>367</sup>

The Steering Committee responded to this memo “with great dismay.” Their response outlined their objections to the association’s stipulations and explained how and why they were perceived as problematic. The tone and content of the memo, they alleged, “is an example of the practice and attitudes which led to the formation of this Institute.” The Steering Committee’s response asserted their vision for the institute. They wrote:

The Institute is designated as autonomous not a ‘sub-committee’ of the regular NWSA Program Committee. Autonomous implies self-determining... However, the majority of points in your memo indicate that your intention for the institute is for it to adhere to the already existing NWSA format and structure. It is precisely the limitations of these which led to the formation of the autonomous Institute. To force the Institute into the existing NWSA mold is to re-institute the racism and classism which the Institute is meant to address.

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<sup>367</sup> Letter from Katherine E. Kleeman and Carol Virginia Pohli, July 29, 1983, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 8.

The Steering Committee also expressed their frustration with the amount of the proposed salary and other requirements, arguing,

The salary stipulated in your memo is unrealistic, considering that the Coordinator will likely have no other source of income. We assume that any women worth of the position is already involved in work in her community. To pay her \$5,300 as Coordinator is to expect her to take an additional part-time job to supplement this. This means a woman of color working in her community will be expected to drop her community work in order to build the NWSA Conference.

The Committee's objections were ideological and practical. They refused to put ask a woman of color to work under conditions that were anything other than truly autonomous and adequately compensated.

The Steering Committee's letter concluded with "hope that you will seriously reassess your thinking and attitudes towards the autonomous Institute." According to the Steering Committee, "The development of the autonomous Institute does not mean business as usual for NWSA. When an institution, unwittingly or otherwise perpetuates racist and classist relations, it can change its practice only by changing its agenda."

<sup>368</sup>They charged with association with radically altering its past and current conduct, which they believed would be the only way to make the association and its conferences

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<sup>368</sup> "Letter from the Steering Committee," August 11, 1983, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 8.

more open and accessible to women of color and the other constituencies under the umbrella of the autonomous institute.<sup>369</sup>

The negotiation around the autonomous institute were part of the ongoing struggle by women of color to have a voice in the Association's operation. In addition to issuing their own challenge to the association's vision for the autonomous institute and its coordinator, the Steering Committee appears to have called upon their allies to put additional pressure on the NWSA. A letter from Marilyn Murphy, a white woman, dated August 12, 1983 echoed the Steering Committee's assertions writing, "This [the position of autonomous institute coordinator] is not an appointment for which white women are qualified to write a job description. If we knew how to do the job, the participation of women of color would not have declined so alarmingly since the Storrs conference and this appointment would be unnecessary."<sup>370</sup> Murphy's letter and other commentary about the promise and perils of the autonomous institute framed it as a significant promise that must be upheld by the association. It is figured as a critical moment, a potential breaking point in the NWSA's historical failures to adequately address issues of difference. If NWSA is to turn the tide from the increasing decrease in participation by women of color since Storrs in 1981 and successfully be open to and include women of color and all groups of women who are not white, heterosexual, and middle class (and often academics), then it must keep this promise and stay true to the mandate behind it.

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<sup>369</sup> The 1984 Conference Coordinators disagreed with this assessment. As did a member of the student caucus, Anmarie Wagstaff who wrote to the coordinators on August 23, 1983 to express her support for them and what they had done so far. See "Letter from Anmarie Wagstaff," August 23, 1983, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 8, Folder 19.

<sup>370</sup> Letter from Marilyn Murphy, August 12, 1983, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 8, Folder 19.

Internal communications among the Steering Committee also reflected this understanding of the significance of the autonomous institute. Woo, an Asian American feminist scholar and poet, wrote to the other members of the Steering Committee in response to the first worrisome memo from the association. In her letter, she argued against “splitting off from NWSA” in response to the association’s “uncooperativeness, bureaucratic demands...[the] general ‘bitchy’ tone of the memo NWSA [had sent them].” Although she and other members of the steering committee (Carole Isaacs, Martha Pintzuk, and Barbara Smith) had discussed the possibility of “doing [their] own conference,” during a phone call on August 10,<sup>371</sup> Woo concluded “that a split would be very harmful to [the Steering Committee] as a coalition and to [them], generally, in the education work [they] are trying to do.” Woo argued that it is important to “Make them [NWSA] accountable to us and all the other women we represent” and not “give NWSA such an easy way out [separating from the association.]”<sup>372</sup>

Woo explained her position by highlighting how the autonomous institute is “a big victory” and that by staying and working within the NWSA the Steering Committee would allow them to reach the most people. She wrote, “NWSA is Women Studies all over the country, with ongoing programs. If we split off to do one conference, or an annual conference, it would not be the same as having an impact on Women Studies. A split would mean cutting ourselves off from mainstream academia...” Woo continued by again asserting the need to not let the association off the hook: “It is obvious that the

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<sup>371</sup> This was immediately prior to the Steering Committee’s official letter in response to the 1984 conference coordinators’ initial memo.

<sup>372</sup> “Re: August 30, 1983 Meeting w/ NWSA Rutgers & Virginia Cyrus, 8/25/1983,” Letter from Merle Woo to Steering Committee, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Barbara Smith Papers, Box 1.

writers of the memo, the leadership of NWSA, are reactionaries, and would love to set it up so that we will leave. We shouldn't bother them anymore with our lively little caucuses, taking mikes over and speaking out with our valid criticisms. So let's push them to carry out their agreement for an autonomous institute." It is clear that Woo and her colleagues viewed the NWSA as an antagonistic but also the best and most appropriate venue for enacting their vision of a more inclusive feminist movement. Despite the difficulties of collaborating with the NWSA, they persevered.

Although the Steering Committee originally nominated Barbara Smith for the position of coordinator, the association's requirements led her to decline the appointment. It took them several months, but by November the Steering Committee locate Martha Quintales and Juanita Ramos, two Latina women, as co-coordinators of the autonomous institute. Although even after their appointment, Carole Isaacs had to respond to an October letter from the 1984 Conference Coordinators asserting "that the Institute is 'on hold' until we hear from you further," and suggesting that only \$3000 was available to fund the part-time coordinator's salary.<sup>373</sup> Again, a member of the Steering Committee took the association to task. Isaacs wrote,

My question to you is: So is the money through Rutgers available or not, if it isn't, what the hell happened to it? And what's this nonsense about \$3,000 from NWSA with the coordinator and the Institute's Steering Committee to raise the difference ourselves? The latter belies your talk of the Institute as a 'priority' for

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<sup>373</sup> "Letter from Marlene Longenecker to Ad Hoc Committee," October 3, 1983. NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 8, Folder 19.

NWSA and an important 'commitment'. I feel this is the most insulting line of action NWSA has taken towards the Institute to date.<sup>374</sup>

Due in large part to the Steering Committee's persistence, funding was secured for salaries for Quintales and Ramos, who went on to plan the 1984 Autonomous Institute in the short window of about six months.

The Autonomous Institute took place on Tuesday, June 26<sup>th</sup>, as part of the programming of the 1984 NWSA Conference. Although the Steering Committee had originally wanted the institute to take place on a separate day immediately prior to the main conference, scheduling issues with Rutgers made this impossible. Instead the institute's programming was offered at the same time as other conference panels. The institute featured twenty-seven panels and workshops, a "Town Meeting," "for women for have participated in the Institutes programming and/or who want to find out more about the Institute" and a "Cultural Event," with performances by singers, poets, and writers. The panels covered a broad variety of topics ranging from "The Politics of Aging" to "Women's Movements in the Arab World" and "Grassroots Activism Within Academic Institutions: What Students Can Do."<sup>375</sup>

In general, it seems that the Autonomous Institute was a success, despite some issues and complaints. For example, one speaker experienced car trouble, which caused

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<sup>374</sup> "RE: The salary for the half-time coordinator of the Institute," Letter from Carole Isaacs, Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Box 1.

<sup>375</sup> "Autonomous Institute of the 1984 N.W.S.A. Conference Program," NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 8.

her to miss her panel. As a result, that particular panel did not feature a Black woman.<sup>376</sup> As with previous conferences, there were also some scheduling conflicts; “On the actual day, [coordinator Juanita] Ramos reported conflicts: among the non-Institute workshops and panels scheduled for the same day were two or three workshops on women of color, and the Autonomous Institute’s evening cultural event conflicted with a performance by Women of the Calabash.”<sup>377</sup> According to coverage from the “Town Meeting” and comments made at individual panels, the most frequent criticism was a lack of poor women and women of color, two of the constituencies the institute was designed to serve. Both coordinators and attendees would have preferred for more low income women to attend the institute, but it was difficult to get low income WOC and international women as well as activists to Douglass because NWSA scholarships did not cover travel costs.<sup>378</sup> The institute coordinators had tried to offset the financial burden for low-income women by allowing attendees to pay their registration fees for the institute on a sliding scale, a practice that conferees had been suggesting of NWSA for years.<sup>379</sup>

Although there were some detractors, conference evaluations echo the mostly positive assessments of the Autonomous Institute. This is particularly significant since, as

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<sup>376</sup> “Issues of Race and Class at NWSA,” *New Women’s Times*, September 1984, 19.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid, 18. Topical overlap and other scheduling conflicts were things that the Steering Committee had been concerned about. In a letter to the institute coordinators, Merle Woo wrote, “I think we must especially push NWSA to stop being secretive about their programming. This is ridiculous. They must be willing to cooperate in programming—otherwise there are going to be repetitions, gaps, and an enormous incongruity between the institute and general programming.” Indeed, it seems that the association resisted cooperating and collaborating with the Autonomous Institute in good faith for the entire planning process. See Letter from Merle Woo, 2/13/84, Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Box 1.

<sup>378</sup> Denise Kulp, Tuesday: Autonomous Institute, *off our backs* vol 4, no 9 (1984), 14.

<sup>379</sup> “Autonomous Institute,” *New Women’s Times*, May 1984, 5.

several evaluations noted, the institute was not included as part of the evaluation form. One evaluation asserted that this oversight reflected the association's continuing failure to address issues of race, class, and difference in general. She writes,

I believe that it is woefully inadequate to schedule an autonomous institute to deal with this issues in competition with 20 other workshops-making discussion of these vital issues an 'elective.' If women's studies should be required, we as women's studies advocates should require ourselves to learn & pay attention to issues of race, class & culture with the same commitment...Although we as white women must take responsibility for raising these issues without always looking to women of color to do so, we must also be sure that women of color, as well as poor & working class women, are visible, organized and have representation at these conferences.<sup>380</sup>

This comment echoes the critiques of scheduling made by coverage in *off our backs* and by the coordinators themselves. The conferee decries the apparent lack of commitment to giving serious consideration and attention to issues of difference and calls upon the association and its predominantly white membership and leadership to do more to address these problems and promote participation by poor, working-class, and women of color.

Those who expressed negative views of the institute on their conference evaluations seem to have been white women who believed it was unnecessarily divisive or separatist. One evaluation asserts that there are already "enough" sessions on women of color and that the association should not trouble itself with being so politically correct. These types of comments seem to be in the minority and to be part of ongoing resistance

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<sup>380</sup> See NWSA Conference Evaluations, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 7, Folders 16-19.



to diversifying NWSA. For example, previous conferences inspired complaints from heterosexual women about the amount of panels and events addressing lesbian concerns while many lesbian attendees insisted that there needed to be more events around these same issues.

The official NWSA account of the 1984 conference and the institute was decidedly more measured. In her editorial covering the 1984 conference, “Time, Consciousness, and Change,” in the association’s affiliated journal *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Nancy Porter, an associate editor of the journal and longtime affiliate of NWSA, questioned the success of the Autonomous Institute. It is worth quoting her summary at length:

This year, as a step toward inclusiveness, programming known as the Autonomous Institute was arranged by an ad hoc coalition of Women of Color/Third World Women, Jewish women, lesbians, students, disabled women, and poor and working-class white women who sought to address issues and concerns found inadequately represented in past conferences.

And, as in past conferences, the effort to rectify under- and inadequate representation drew mixed reviews, as did the whole conference.

Most noted excellent sessions in both the autonomous and regular programs; some commented on the duplication of content, conflict in scheduling, and substance not on the cutting edge of theory or research. More distressing as the realization that the conference did not reach out to all the potentially concerned or interested women in the area. Local K through 12 educators for invited to a special day of sessions. The Autonomous Institute, however, drew attendance mainly from the ranks of those already at the conference. Overall, the timeliness and importance of the issues raised were contrasted by a peculiarly laid-back atmosphere. As people drifted from session to session and from one

idea to another, it felt at time as though the ship of feminist education weren't being steered so much as set adrift.<sup>381</sup>

Porter elided the association's responsibility for scheduling issues and overlap in content. She seems to lay responsibility for any failures at the feet of the Autonomous Institute coordinators.

She minimized the institute's successes and instead foregrounds critiques of the Autonomous Institute's inability to reach out to local low-income women, which the institute coordinators attributed to the short amount of time they had to plan the event, which was, as I note above, in part due to roadblocks enacted by the association's leadership. Her comment about the "peculiarly laid-back atmosphere" seems to be a jab at the institute's efforts to include more activist and community organizing activities, in contrast to the conference's usual decidedly academic tone.

Interestingly, Porter's editorial made no mention of the most contentious and race-focused plenary of the conference. Like Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and Angela Davis had before her, Bonnie Thornton Dill used her talk at the NWSA conference, as part of a the "Is Feminism on the Agenda for Women of Color?", plenary to highlight the ongoing failures of the association and the women's movement to be inclusive of marginalized women, especially non-white women. Dill began her talk by objecting to the way the plenary's mandate was framed:

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<sup>381</sup> Nancy Porter, "Editorial," *Women's Studies Quarterly* vol 12, no 3 (1984): 1.

The letter which I received inviting me to the conference stated that a resolution was passed in at the 1983 NWSA conference calling for a presentation of a 1984 plenary session ‘addressing the concerns of women of color without focusing specifically on racism.’ In other words, Bonnie Dill Thorton, Polly Baca, Luice Cheng, and Loise Steele [myself and the other panelists] were asked to talk about our concerns but not focus on how the fact that we are Black, Mexican American, Asian American, and Native American has shaped these concerns.

How do you, I asked, address the concerns of women of color *without* focusing on racism? And what is the ethos that has led a group of feminists to make such a request of women of color?”<sup>382</sup>

Dill argued that the impulse to erase the profound and inextricable influence of racism on women of color’s lives from the talks at the plenary would force nonwhite women to ignore a major part of their identities and experiences. She attributed the bizarre framing of the plenary’s prompt to NWSA’s and the women’s movement’s general discomfort with discussing racism, “which [frequently] generates anger, fear, hostility, and mistrust.”<sup>383</sup> Although the NWSA had, as part of its mission, a commitment to the eradication of racism, doing the work to achieve that goal has been a challenge for the association.

In lieu of answering the question put to her by conference organizers, Dill proposed reformulation of it: ‘Does feminism, as it is currently defined, fully incorporate the issues, ideas and concerns of women of color?’ She contextualized this reformulated query historically. Dill reviewed the how white and nonwhite women’s concerns have historically been different because of nonwhite women’s “commitment to the

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<sup>382</sup> Bonnie Thornton Dill, “We Must Redefine Feminism,” *Sojourner* (September 1984), 10. Several conference evaluations echoed Dill’s criticism of the framing of the panel’s mandate.

<sup>383</sup> *ibid*

improvement of the[ir] racial-ethnic group.” Drawing upon scholarship by Angela Davis (including the content of her 1982 plenary speech), Cheryl Gilkes, and Phyllis Palmer, Dill illustrated how longstanding divisions between white and nonwhite women have been. She also noted how “racial animosity and mistrust have undermined the potential for coalition.” Given this history and, in particular, how women of color have practiced feminism or “womanism,” to use Alice Walker’s term, differently from white women, Dill asserted that the question of women of color’s relationship to the mainstream feminist movement must be framed different:

If we are truly about the business of eradicating racism and addressing the needs and concerns of such groups as low-income, student, white poor and working-class women, lesbians, Jewish women, women with disabilities, *and* women of color, then we must be engaged in the process of seeking a new definition of feminism that *begins* with the needs and interest of diverse groups of women. they cannot merely be asked to add their names to a document which they have not fully participated in drafting.<sup>384</sup>

Because the existing vision of feminism, as represented in the problematic framing of the plenary, failed to adequately include the needs of women of color, Dill argued that major changes must be made to the women’s movement as it currently exists and to individual feminists’ actions. She outlined seven steps feminists must take to insure that the women’s movement is inclusive of marginalized groups. This includes the assertion,

...we must be willing to stretch ourselves—to listen to and take seriously perspectives that are different from our own. I think this is particularly true for

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<sup>384</sup> *ibid* 11

white feminists who must go beyond giving lip service to the notion of difference and begin to examine how those differences change their analyses of women's situations. This can only be done by putting our own lives on the line and by acknowledging our linkages—many of which are not too pretty—to one another.<sup>385</sup>

Dill's argument here paralleled Lorde and Rich's at the 1981 conference. Everyone must make changes and take risks, but white women in particular do the difficult work of confronting their own biases, incorporating analysis of race, class, sexuality, and ability in their scholarship and activism, and acknowledging the difficult histories. Ultimately what Dill proposed is "a 'paradigm shift,' the creation of new concepts and a new perception of reality. This result would be a definition of feminism that is open enough to encompass the broad and divergent interpretations of feminism that exist for women of color."<sup>386</sup>

At least one of Dill's co-panelists similarly questioned the framing of the plenary. Evaluations that mentioned the plenary were consistent in their praise of Dill's talk in particular. One conferee even suggested that she be in the featured keynote speaker at the 1985 conference. Together the Autonomous Institute programming and Dill's plenary speech are portrayed in evaluations as the most enjoyable, significant parts of the conference and the primary sites where issues of difference were seriously engaged by conferees. Although Dill had encouraged white women to do the heavy lifting of

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<sup>385</sup> *ibid*

<sup>386</sup> *ibid*

addressing racism within the Association, it was primarily organizing and interventions by women of color that actually addressed these issues at the 1984 conference.

Ultimately, the 1984 Delegate Assembly did not vote to repeat the Autonomous Institute at the 1985 annual conference in Seattle, Washington. Although they acknowledged the importance of its programming, they voted instead to incorporate the topics and populations it targeted more fully into the general conference programming. They voted to continue the commitment of the unnumbered recommendation from 1983, but not the institute itself. The NWSA almost decided to revoke all financial commitment to funding such programming. But, as a result of lobbying “by women from the new Working Class Caucus and the AI Steering Committee/Coordinators,” amendments were added to the recommendation that “restored the choice of coordinator to the AI constituencies and appropriate \$3 of each regular member’s dues (average \$25) to the program (about \$4500). It was a compromise solution which removes autonomy from the name and only partially funds the ‘special program.’”<sup>387</sup> The institute did not live on but the association agreed to continue to fund a designated coordinator to oversee “special interest” programming the 1985 conference.

Largely as a result of the Autonomous Institute, attendance of women of color at the annual conference increased from the previous year. But the association’s renewed commitment to addressing difference was short-lived and it quickly returned to “business as usual.”<sup>388</sup> The 1985 conference in Seattle was themed ““Creating Choices through

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<sup>387</sup> Mary K. Roberson, *Women’s Studies News*, vol 7, no. 1 ( Fall 1984), 5.

<sup>388</sup> Garth 73/80

Feminist Education” and the 1986 conference at University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana focused on” Women Working for Change: Health, Cultures, and Society.” Both conferences had sessions and keynotes that addressed the concerns of the constituencies the Autonomous Institute had been formed to serve, but they were not prioritized.

By this time, the mid-1980s, the cohort of Black women scholars who had gone to graduate school in the 1970s, were now working in academia. They were working as professors at colleges and universities and were producing new scholarship that focused on Black women’s culture and history. In doing so, they were building a field that Barbara Smith had envisioned in the mid-1970s: Black Women’s Studies. Several months before the sixth annual NWSA conference at Douglass College, a group of Black women scholars published the first issue of an academic journal devoted to the study of Black women. *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal of Black Women*.

In the premiere issue of *SAGE*, editor Patricia Bell-Scott and her co-editor Beverly Guy-Sheftall explained their motivation for founding the journal. They attribute the inspiration for *SAGE* to Black feminist scholar and longtime Civil Rights activist Ruby Sales. According to Scott,

During a lengthy feminist discussion last summer [1983], Ruby Sales said, ‘What you need to do Pat and Bev, is a journal, there is no forum which has our lives as its focus.’ Because Ruby made this remark in a classic ‘you-better-take-me-seriously’ Black woman manner, we took her seriously and decided that she was

right. So less than a year after she issued her directive, we celebrate the birth of *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*.<sup>389</sup>

The journal was created to fill a gap in the scholarly landscape. As Sales noted, in 1983 there was no journal devoted to the study of Black women's lives and culture. Black women had been participating in feminist academic organizations, like NWSA, for several years but the only existing professional organization for Black women scholars was the and the Association of Black Women Historians, founded in 1979. The creation of *SAGE* then was the first scholarly journal devoted solely to Black women's lives. As such, the journal had as its three objectives: "(1) to provide a forum for critical discussion of issues relating to Black women, (2) to promote feminist scholarship, and (3) to disseminate new knowledge about Black women to a broad audience." It was to provide a forum for the publication of scholarship by and about Black women and to make that scholarship accessible to women outside of the academy.

*SAGE* emerged right in the midst of the 1980s controversies around race and racism in the feminist movement, especially among feminist academics as conflicts with NWSA illustrate. We can thus view *SAGE* as both a product of the increasing numbers of Black women in American academia and as a response to the failures of the mainstream feminist movement to sufficiently include women of color. Indeed Bell-Scott describes the time of the journal's emergence as a "propitious moment." She writes,

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<sup>389</sup> Patricia Bell-Scott, "In Celebration of Black Women's Scholarship," *SAGE* vol. 1, no.1 (Spring 1984), 2.



Black studies is about twenty years old; women's studies is ten years old; and a Black women's literary renaissance fueled by the creative energies of [list of Black women writers] is afoot. It is also no coincidence that the number of scholars and research programs specializing on Black women has increased, at the same time that a Black women's movement has begun to articulate the impact of white and male biases upon our lives. So, it is from this context of intellectual, creative, and political fervor that *SAGE* emerges.

At the same time that Black women were advocating for increased inclusion in academia, in particular in the NWSA, they were also creating venues for themselves. During its twelve year existence, during which it published nineteen issues, *SAGE* would become a reflection of the vibrancy of Black women's scholarship and a driver of its expansion.

From its inception, *SAGE* was an "interdisciplinary journal." For example, although the first issue's theme was "Black Women's Education," it featured writings by historians, nursing professionals, and educational researchers. Future issues would include work by sociologists, literary critics, fiction writers, leaders from the field of high education, and feminist theorists as well as reviews and coverage of work from other disciplines. Generally the issues were broadly thematic, allowing for a range of different perspectives and fields to contribute to each issue. Themes included "Women as Writers," "Leadership," "Relationships," and "Health," among others. This commitment to interdisciplinarity was also evident in the regular section "Research Update," which included a list of recent Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations about Black women.

*SAGE* published work by some of the most influential Black feminist scholars of its time including but not limited to bell hooks, Johnetta B. Cole, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Barbara Smith, Paula Giddings, Nellie Y. McKay, and, of course, its founding

editors Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Patricia Bell-Scott. *SAGE* also recognized and nurtured the next generation of Black women scholars. The journal established awards for graduate students as well as a Sage Writers/Scholars internship program.<sup>390</sup> Early winners of honorable mention for the graduate student award included Barbara Ransby and Farah Jasmine Griffin who would go on in the 1990s to become leaders in the fields of Black women's history and literature, respectively.

Black women scholars' efforts to create spaces for themselves and to diversify existing, white-dominated feminist spaces, collided at Spelman College, in Atlanta, Georgia. *SAGE* was founded at, based out of, and partially supported by funding from the historically Black women's college, where Guy-Sheftall was a professor. Spelman was also the site for the NWSA's eighth annual conference in 1987. The Spelman conference would another attempt for the association to reckon with its past failures to address racism and the pinnacle of attendance by women of color, especially Black women.

Several conference evaluations from 1984 reference the possibility of holding NWSA's annual conference at a Black women's college. Although all of these suggestions, presumably from white women, misspell the college's name as "Spellman," they are enthusiastic about the possibility and encourage the association to pursue it. In fact, NWSA's efforts to hold a conference at Spelman began as early as 1983. In part in response to the fallout from Storrs, NWSA leadership reached out to Spelman's president at the time, The location and dates were already set for the 1985 conference, but in

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<sup>390</sup> Jacqueline Jones Royster, "Capping a Sagestone: The Final Issue," *SAGE* vol 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 3.

February of 1985 NWSA did reach out to Donald M. Stewart, to inquire about the possibility of holding the tenth anniversary conference in 1987 at Spelman.<sup>391</sup>

In June of 1985, after considering the association's proposal, Spelman initially declined the offer. Despite their desire "to serve both as host institution, as well as shape the agenda of the conference so that it reflects the concerns, aspirations, and scholarship of Black women," the college "concluded...that [they] just do not have the resources, human, financial or physical...[necessary] to undertake such a project." But President Stewart did suggest, "[Spelman] would be happy to collaborate with another institution...in co-hosting the meeting if [Spelman's] institutional responsibility was in keeping with [their] size and capabilities."<sup>392</sup> After receiving Stewart's letter, NWSA reached out to two other colleges in the Atlanta area, Emory University and Agnes Scott College, as possible co-sponsors. By the end of 1985, NWSA had secured a co-hosting arrangement with both institutions and Spelman.

In a letter to Emory's president, conference coordinator Caryn McTighe Musil explains NWSA's eagerness to hold the conference at Spelman. She outlines NWSA's commitment to anti-racism, as written in the organization's 1977 preamble and cites the 1981 Storrs conference as evidence of this commitment. Musil goes on to outline the current political and scholarly moment, suggesting that "new possibilities have emerged" as a result of the evolution of Black and white women's political and personal stances.

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<sup>391</sup> See "Letter to James T. Laney," October 29, 1985, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 23, Folder 24.

<sup>392</sup> "Letter to Ms. Musil," June 15, 1985, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 23, Folder 24.

Musil's assertion that Black women were only just now "defin[ing] the particularity of their relation to the Black [liberation] movement," is specious as Black women had been engaging with and challenging the politics of Black Nationalism and Black Studies for years. Furthermore, her claim that, "white women increasingly insist that women's studies include an analysis of race in its research and pedagogy," elides the long history of Black women's critique of the women's movement's racial politics, including within the NWSA itself. However, her admission that the act of "celebrat[ing] our tenth anniversary at a Black woman's college was a clear way of making a statement about our commitment and our hope for the future" and "explore the intersection of race and gender with more sophistication, accuracy, and cooperation than we [the NWSA] have yet been able to do," reveals the association's understanding that their past efforts at addressing race had been inadequate.<sup>393</sup> Musil's letter goes on to suggest that Emory would benefit from association with the event.<sup>394</sup> The prospect of the "joint cooperation of a traditional white and traditionally Black institutions for our 1987 national conference" is "a unique opportunity to set a new and forceful direction for feminist education in the future."<sup>395</sup>

The NWSA and Spelman both understood the 1987 conference, as with the 1981 and 1984 conferences, to be a deciding event for the ongoing relationship of women of color to the mainstream feminist movement. Their awareness of the event's importance is evident in planning documents and the final conference program. As part of conference

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<sup>393</sup> "Letter to James T. Laney," 2, 1.

<sup>394</sup> "More importantly, however, is the opportunity for Emory to assert its influence in making this ambitious venture occur. The message to women and minorities around the country about Emory's leadership in this matter would not be overlooked."

<sup>395</sup> Ibid, 7.

planning, NWSA Conference Coordinators reached out to the Women of Color Caucus a year before the 1987 conference, to inquire about their desires for the event. They wrote, “As conference coordinators, we are very concerned that the theme of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference be carried out as completely and with as much feminist integrity as possible. We want this conference to address the issues that that have been most emphasized in your caucus,” and request that the Caucus members, “Please write or call us with issues that you feel need to be address...names of individual that should be included in plenary or workshop sessions, and culture events that will complement the conference.”<sup>396</sup>

Black women were involved in the planning of the 1987 NWSA at an unprecedented level.<sup>397</sup> At Spelman, Guy-Sheftall acted as the college’s liaison with NWSA for the duration of the conference planning.<sup>398</sup> The African American Women’s Task Force, a group which had been formed during the 1986 national conference, was also heavily involved in conference organizing. According to a Task Force Report from January, 1987, the members of the Task Force, “have been working closely with the Women of Color Caucus, structure and submitting proposals for the NWSA ’87 conference plenary and developing review methods for submitted proposals to the Caucus and the Task Force. Considerable effort has been made by all active Task Force

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<sup>396</sup> “Letter to NWSA Women of Color Caucus,” April 20, 1986, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 23, Folder 23.

<sup>397</sup> According to *off our backs*, the 1987 conference was “the first time a significant part of the program was put together by Black women.” See *off our backs*, vol. 17, no. 8 (1987), 1.

<sup>398</sup> “Letter to Ruth A. Schmidt,” December 10, 1985, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 23, Folder 24.

members to make [the 1987] conference a memorable and successful one.”<sup>399</sup> Records indicate that the Task Force was also involved in selecting the honoree for the association’s Tenth Anniversary Dinner.<sup>400</sup> The boast in the official conference program that, “the conference committees have developed an agenda we hope will engage each participant in a careful examination of the intersection of race and gender,”<sup>401</sup> seems to have been accurate. The dramatic increase in attendance by women of color—thirty-eight percent of the 1600 attendees were women of color<sup>402</sup>—and the positive response to the conference itself indicates that they were at least somewhat successful at achieving their goal.

The 1987 annual conference was titled “Weaving Women’s Colors: A Decade of Empowerment.” Dr. Johnetta B. Cole, who had been appointed as the first Black women president of Spelman College earlier that year, opened conference proceedings. She introduced the opening plenary, “The Political Empowerment of African-American Women: Furthering a Feminism Agenda for the Twenty-First Century,” by commenting on the conference theme and the historic nature of the event:

As we weave, we must weave well. All the colors are represented here – in the proportions that would be idea – but all the colors women need to make a blanket as wide as the sky and as diverse as our many traditions....We women must weave well this time,’ she continued, ‘because we have announced to the world that we are serious about interweaving the threads of our lives. Having the many colors of our lives at the base of this loom, should we dare once again repeat that

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<sup>399</sup> “The African American Women’s Task Force - Task Force Report,” January 17, 1987, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series I, Box 2.

<sup>400</sup> “Letter to Brenda Verner,” December, 17, 1986, NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series I, Box 2.

<sup>401</sup> “NWSA ’87 Conference Program,” NWSA Papers, University of Maryland, Series XIII, Box 23, Folder 31, p 10.

<sup>402</sup> Garth 73.

old pattern of white dominance, it will be worse than if we had never brought the colors to the loom.<sup>403</sup>

Cole's talk set the tone for the conference by issuing a call for an NWSA and a women's movement that was inclusive of all women and recognized their diverse identities and concerns. She built upon the imagery from the conference's theme to illustrate how a united organization would be stronger and richer for its diversity but also that it would require work from every individual involved. She also gestured towards previous failures to build an interracial feminist coalition, both in general and specific to the NWSA. By referencing "that old pattern of white dominance," Cole clearly framed racism as the major force to be rallied against. Her statement is a continuation of the ongoing efforts by Black women and other women of color to push the association to address its failings. Yet again, a Black woman articulated how the Association could and must do better.

Speaking part of the "Political Empowerment of African-American Women" opening plenary, Angela Davis echoed Cole's remarks. She said that this was a historic moment for the women's movement and women's studies: "we are about to find ourselves on the crest of a third wave [of feminism]." Davis continued, "The task that lies before us is to create a revolutionary, multiracial women's movement which reflects

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<sup>403</sup> jk, tricia lootens, and Karen mudd. "NWSA: Weaving Women's Colors." *off our backs* vol. 17, no. 8 (1987), 1.

the central importance of issues affecting working class and poor women. This will not be a simple process.”<sup>404</sup>

Although the task of addressing different was not “simple,” the 1987 Spelman conference was more successful at engaging these issues than any previous NWSA conference. The breath and depth of the topics conference organizers curated is evident in the themes of the four plenaries. The additional conference plenaries were “Pain Survival Triumph: Voices of Poor and Working Class Women”; “Spinning Threads of Women’s Movement,” which “sought ‘to illustrate how our different cultural experiences create an ever diversifying worldwide women’s community’<sup>405</sup> and included speakers of American Indian, Asian American, Latin American, Lesbian, Black South African, and Black American identities; “Women and the Constitution: Where Do We Go from Here?”; and “Big Mountain Relocation and Resistance,” where two American Indian women “spoke to the diversity of women’s concerns, linked U.S. government policies toward women and toward exploitation of the earth, and provided (by precept and example) a lesson in resistance and mutual aid.”<sup>406</sup> Each of these panels featured a diversity of voices and perspectives across ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, abilities, and experiences

Coverage of the conference was positive. Farah Griffin, then a graduate student, covered the event for *SAGE*. In her review, she agreed with others’ interpretation of the significance of the conference:

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid 1.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid 14.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid 10



All participants recognized that past failures to address adequately issues of race, class, and gender have kept Women's Studies and the Women's Movement divided and in doing so hindered progress. This conference indicated the desire of NWSA to help remedy this situation and to work towards building an approach to the study of women and a Women's Movement that are representative of all women.<sup>407</sup>

*off our backs's* extensive coverage of the conference, including all four plenaries, was similarly laudatory. Their summary echoed Davis's claim that the conference represented a sea change in the women's movement. They went so far as to suggest, "[the 1987 conference] may mark the beginning of the third wave of women's liberation."<sup>408</sup>

Although attendance of women of color reached an all time high in 1987, those women did not return for subsequent NWSA conferences. After 1987, Black women split off from the Women of Color caucus to create a separate African American Women's Caucus, believing that their own caucus would better serve their needs as a group. In 1990, Black women participated in walk out at the national conference in Akron, Ohio in protest of the firing of the first full-time Black woman staff member of the NWSA, assistant director Ruby Sales. NWSA leadership attempted to portray Sales's termination as justified. But many women of color members and sales herself insisted it was a result of the association's continuing inability and unwillingness to address racism within the association. The walkout at the 1990 conference occurred after NWSA leadership refused to negotiate with upset women of color and listen to their demands. According to

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<sup>407</sup> Farah Griffin, "Conference Report: National Women's Studies Association, 'Weaving Women's Colors, A Decade of Empowerment, Spelman College, June 24-28, 1987,'" *SAGE* vol. 4, no. 1 (Spring 1987), 82.

<sup>408</sup> jk, et. al, 1.

interviews conducted by Phyllis Ham Garth, the firing of Sales and the subsequent walkout had a profound impact on the NWSA and the field of women's studies at large.<sup>409</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As they had done for over a decade, Black women feminist scholars and activists continued to push for a more inclusive women's studies and more diversity in American academia at large. In 1991, in response to the sexist and racist vitriol directed at Anita Hill when she accused Clarence Hill of sexual harassment during his Senate confirmation hearings, a group of Black women scholars drafted and published a statement in support of Hill. Although it was originally drafted by Barbara Ransby, Deborah King, and Elsa Barkley Brown, the statement was ultimately signed by 1,601 Black women. Titled, "African American Women in Defense of Ourselves," the statement was published as a full-page ad in the *New York Times* on November 7, 1991.<sup>410</sup> The three drafters and many of the signatories were Black women academics. The statement referred to Anita Hill as "Professor Hill"; for the Black women writers and signatories, she was a sister, one of them, not only because of her race and gender, but also because of her profession.<sup>411</sup> As

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<sup>409</sup> Garth, 75.

<sup>410</sup> The statement was later published as a poster by Kitchen Table Press. See *The Black Scholar* vol 22, no. 1 & 2, 155.

<sup>411</sup> Hill had been a practicing while working for Thomas as his attorney and then later at the U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission. But after leaving the EEOC, she took a position as an assistant professor at a school of law. During her career, Hill has since worked as a professor of law, women's studies, and social policy.

Black women scholars had been doing for the previous two decades, and indeed long before that, they linked their intellectual pursuits to activist commitments.

The 1994 conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) devoted to Black women in the academy, “Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name, 1894-1994,” took its name from 1991 the statement’s title. Conference organizers Evelyn Hammonds and Robin Kilson, both assistant professors at MIT, described the goal of the conference as, “to provide a forum in which we [Black women scholars] can meet to discuss our mutual concerns...to the best of our knowledge, this is the first time a national conference has been convened to discuss specific issues of concern to the Black female professoriate.”<sup>412</sup> The three day long conference was attended by over 2,000 Black women.<sup>413</sup> The call for papers solicited works “that addressed three broad areas: the current situation of Black women in the academy at every rank; the relationship of Black women’s studies to other academic disciplines, most notably women’s studies and African-American and ethnic studies; and the role of Black women scholars in the world outside of the academy.”<sup>414</sup> The resulting conference program of fifty-four panels and several keynote speeches and plenaries explored a variety of issues and topics, ranging from the decidedly academic to the personal and political. Panel topics included Black

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<sup>412</sup> Chalis Johnson, “A Conference Report from MIT: ‘All I’m Askin’ is a Little Respect’: Black Women in the Academy,” *The Black Scholar* vol. 24, no.1 (1994), 2.

<sup>413</sup> *ibid*

<sup>414</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, “When the Margin is the Center: African-American Feminism(s) and ‘Difference.’” *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*. eds. Joan W. Scott, et. al. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 304.

feminist literary theory, activism within and outside the academy, pedagogy, and Black women's leadership.<sup>415</sup>

In addition to providing a necessary space for discussions of the unique challenges facing Black women in academe, accounts of the conference describe it as providing emotional and spiritual succor to its attendees. Descriptions of women crying during presentations, while asking questions, while telling their life stories abound. Reflecting on the conference in 1997, Hammonds wrote,

For many Black women present at this meeting, the years of confronting racism in the women's movement had taken their toll. This was work few of the survivors of these earlier confrontations wanted to continue. The MIT meeting presented an opportunity to do the work that had been constantly shunted aside when those confrontations occurred, i.e., the development of a feminist theory and praxis that would attend to the differences among African-American women as well as those among all women of color.<sup>416</sup>

When this group of Black women academics came together at MIT in 1994, the conflict over racism in the women's movement and academia, which had dominated Black women's conference interactions and experiences the previous decade, was absent. According to Hammonds, the lack of necessity to engage with white (women) about race and racism and to expend the amount of emotional and physical energy that such conversations demanded, opened up opportunities to discuss other issues. Now they could "do the work that had been constantly shunted aside" in the past. This resulted in

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<sup>415</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "The Territory Between Us: A Report on 'Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Name: 1894-1994,'" *Callaloo* vol. 17, no. 3 (1994), 444.

<sup>416</sup> Hammonds, 304.

both an opportunity for the gathered Black women to present and discuss their scholarship, but also their shared experiences as Black women in academe.

The conference's focus on intra-racial issues occasioned novel discussions, but this new space also led to disagreements. Several accounts attest to how the gathering of "sister-professors," as Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole called them in her remarks at the conference, revealed how much differences among Black women still needed to be reckoned with.<sup>417</sup> As Hammonds writes, "In a meeting where the confrontation with racism was moved to the margins, the problems of difference and of politics for Black feminists were more starkly revealed."<sup>418</sup> According to Hammonds, the MIT conference marked a shift in the discourse around difference among Black feminist scholars; where previously, they had focused on differences between themselves and white women, now Black women were concentrating on the differences between each other. However, this reckoning with what Black feminism would look like for Black women apart from the mainstream women's movement had long been a part of Black feminist community building and organizing. At the same time that Black women had been pushing for a reckoning with difference within the larger women's movement, they had been creating their own separate, intraracial groups in which discussion of the differences among Black women and how Black feminism could enable coalition building despite them were central. In the next chapter, I will map how these intraracial, explicitly feminist groups outside of the academy enabled the development of Black feminist theory and praxis, simultaneously encouraging supportive relationships among the Black women members.

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<sup>417</sup> See Hammonds, Hartman, and Johnson.

<sup>418</sup> Hammonds, 305.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### **Sisterhood and Home Girls: Black Feminists' Intra-racial Organizing and Publishing**

“But for now, black feminists, of necessity it seems, exist as individuals – some well known, like Eleanor Holmes Norton, Florynce Kennedy, Faith Ringgold, Shirley Chisholm, Alice Walker, and some unknown like me. We exist as women who are black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle – because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world.”

- Michele Wallace, “Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood” (1975)

“Isolation is a painfully familiar situation for Black feminists and Lesbians. The sequence of letters which follows points to our need for each other”

“The antidote to isolation is networking, the creation of community. Networking is also an essential step in building our movement. “

- Barbara and Beverly Smith, ““I Am Not Meant to be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists 1972–1978.” (1978)

#### *Introduction*

I begin the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation with the above epigraphs because they accurately reflect the affective state of Black feminism in the mid- to late-1970s. As I have demonstrated, Black women’s studies and the growth of Black women in the academy reached their peak during the 1980s, but at the end of the 1970s, Black feminists were still very much isolated. This decade was characterized by a longing for

connection that produced the early Black Feminist anthologies. At this moment, some Black women, like Lorde, were already professionally established, but many others were just recently out of graduate school, like Barbara Smith, beginning their first academic jobs like Akasha Gloria Hull, or just embarking upon their careers as writers. The end of the 1970s was a time of loneliness and longing for Black feminists but also one of possibility.

The loneliness that Wallace described in 1975 would begin towards the end of the decade to be alleviated by Black women's creation of intra-racial groups, publications, and even institutions. These collectives, and all of them were group endeavors, brought Black feminists together for the first time to discuss their feminism and their ideas for the future. Out of these collectives came emotional intimacy, professional connections, and, importantly, publications. Although the first of these groups, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), folded in 1976, Black feminists continued to gather and organize in both formal and informal ways through the 1980s. In this chapter I analyze (1) how several groups came to be and also (2) how the personal relationships and political thinking they generated initiated the flowering of Black feminism in the 1980s.

A large part of this expansion and maturation of a Black feminist movement was due to publishing. Anthologies, special issues, and even, eventually, an independent press created venues for Black feminists to articulate their ideas and share them with the world. Black feminists understood the importance of the written word to building and growing a Black feminist movement. "I am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists, 1972-1978," the article from which two of the

above epigraphs are taken, curates a collection of letters written between Black feminists. Barbara and Beverly Smith compiled the letters and analyzed their contents because they believed letter-writing “was an important part of [their] Black feminist activity.”<sup>419</sup> They observe, “One reason for the rich variety of the letters’ contents is that have so few places as Black feminists to send our creations and to share ourselves when these letters were written we didn’t have a single publication of our own. We still don’t have our own *off our backs* or even our own *Ms.*”<sup>420</sup> Because Black women had been shut out of much of second-wave feminist print culture because of racism and certainly had struggled to gain access to mainstream publishing houses, they eventually created their own publishing vehicles to facilitate the publication and proliferation of both Black and Third World feminist work. These publications came about in large part due to connections made through collectives—The Sisterhood, the Combahee River Collective’s Black Feminist Retreats, and other conferences and informal groups.

Thus Black women’s collective action from the late 1970s through the 1980s produced two kinds of networks: (1) literary networks of publications and authors and (2) interpersonal networks of Black feminist writers, thinkers, and activists, bonded by friendship and respect. These two types of networks fed and reinforced each other. Due to the conviviality of group gatherings, where there were both serious political conversations and good food, and the continuation of those connections outside of group meetings, Black feminists were able to build networks of support even though they were

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<sup>419</sup> Barbara and Beverly Smith. “I am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists, 1972-1978.” *Conditions* 4 (1978): 62.

<sup>420</sup> *ibid* 63



geographically separated. The emotional connections between individual women helped them survive. Frequently, these relationships also resulted in professional and material support. Black feminists would solicit articles for publications, recommend each other for positions, support applications for graduate school and grants, and sometimes even send each other money.

In this chapter I trace the activity and history of two similar groups both formed in 1977: the Sisterhood and the women who attended the Black Feminist Retreats, planned by members of the Combahee River Collective. Then I will turn to how autonomous publishing was a major driver of the proliferation of Black feminist thought, including the literary journal *Azalea* and *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue*. Taken together, these groups and publications created spaces for the incubation of Black feminist theory and, because they were intra-racial spaces, the opportunity for Black feminists to make personal connections with each other that sustained their thinking and their spirits.

### *The Sisterhood*

On January 29, 1977, June Jordan wrote to Audre Lorde to invite her to the first meeting of what would become known as “The Sisterhood.” She wrote, “Alice [Walker] & I are having this chitlins & champagne dinner for a kind of Black Sisterhood of the Spirit Happy Purpose. Please come.”<sup>421</sup> Originally imagined as a way to discuss the future of Black women’s writing and the possibility of “collective action” around

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<sup>421</sup> “Letter from June Jordan.” Series 1.2, Box 10, Folder 123. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

publishing, The Sisterhood, a group of Black women that met periodically from February of 1977 to early 1978, became an intra-racial community of Black women thinkers and a space where they discussed and built a Black feminist movement, especially as it related to writing and literary institution building.

It is unclear exactly how The Sisterhood originated or whose idea it was. But it was a New York City-based group, composed of Black women, and limited to Black women artists and writers. Although their meetings were serious, participation seemed to be fluid and inconsistent. In a letter to Michele Wallace in April of 1977, Alice Walker described the attendance policy thusly: “There is no stigma attached to not attending, just as there is no coercion for attending. We come if we wish. Or not, that’s cool.”<sup>422</sup> Furthermore, attendance records are only included in some of the meeting minutes. From the group’s records and correspondence it is clear that Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, June Jordan, Margo Jefferson, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, and Michele Wallace all attended some of the meetings. But Lorde seems to have only gone once or twice while Morrison, Walker, and Jordan were some of the core members of the group. Much of what took place seems to have been lost to memory. When interviewed by Alex Pauline Gumbs, members could either not remember the events themselves or were unsure about who exactly had attended.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> Letter from Alice Walker. April 7, 1977. Michele Wallace Papers. Schomburg Center.

<sup>423</sup> Gumbs 447.

The first meeting took place on February 6, 1977 at June Jordan's home. According to a summary of the meeting later drafted and circulated by Abike,<sup>424</sup> "The initial purpose [of the group] was to have some writers/artists over to congregate, get to know each other better, eat and talk about topics of common interest and concern."<sup>425</sup> As would become typical of the group, the meeting began with a potluck meal and then evolved into serious discussion about their shared concerns as Black women artists. In the summary of this meeting, Abike described their conversations:

...the sisters began to discuss problems Black Women Artists/Writers/Poets married and single face in seeking publication of their work and surviving from day to day. The discussion was lengthy, broad and at times complicated. Simultaneously, it was about and exhibited the need for the creation/formation of varying types of support mechanisms for Black Women Writers both structured and unstructured, organized and ad hoc.<sup>426</sup>

A discussion of their shared needs quickly revealed two somewhat overlapping categories: personal and material. The personal primarily consisted of the desire to have community with other Black women writers and artists and "support mechanisms" for their well-being and professional and artistic success. Their material concerns were about the difficulty of sustaining themselves financially as writers and artists and their struggles to be published. This latter set of concerns ultimately dominated the first meeting and set the agenda for much of the group's subsequent work.

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<sup>424</sup> I have not been able to find Abike's last name.

<sup>425</sup> Minutes from first three meetings, March 15, 1977, Alice Walker Papers.

<sup>426</sup> *ibid*

At this first meeting, the women gathered outlined two possible interventions to improve the lives and careers of Black women writers. These interventions were (1) an alternative press or publication of some kind devoted to publishing the work of Black women and (2) “an organization of Black Poets and Writers to serve as a central network of communication, a center for gathering and disseminating information by, about, for and to Black Writers and Poets.”<sup>427</sup> The Black Poets and Writers organization, later referred to as a “clearinghouse,”<sup>428</sup> did not gain much traction, but the group’s ambitious plan for some sort of publishing apparatus that would support all new Black authors, not only Black women, as well as republishing out of print literary works by Black authors continued to preoccupy the group during the course of its existence.

From its inception, The Sisterhood envisioned its publication arm as a cultural juggernaut. At the February 6<sup>th</sup> meeting, they imagined their press or periodical “would serve as an alternative to such periodicals as The Village Voice or The New York Times.” It would also “anthologize important periodical publications of Black Writings; and publish new Black works.” Thus the publishing apparatus would serve three distinct groups of Black writers: those who were up and coming or new, established writers, and those whose work was “out of print and for the most part unavailable.” Whatever form it took, they imagined their publishing project to be as large and as influential and powerful as major New York periodicals. Seemingly inspired by Toni Morrison’s position at Random House, they also wondered if “a major publishing house such as Random House

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<sup>427</sup> *ibid*

<sup>428</sup> Meeting Minutes, March 20 1977, Box 102, Folder 2, Alice Walker Papers. Rose Manuscript and Rare Book Library. Emory University.

might be interested in forming a relationship with such an independent press for distribution purposes among others.”<sup>429</sup>

At a luncheon meeting on February 10<sup>th</sup>, Audreen Ballard, Toni Morrison. Abike met to discuss further the idea of a publication. According to the minutes, “The threshold question considered was what kind of publication could best serve as an alternative to a Voice or Times and simultaneously fill the void for a serious Black literary magazine.” With the aim of answering this larger question, Morrison, Ballard, and Abike considered, “To whom should the publication be addressed?” and “What would be the purpose and scope of the publication?” In answer to the first question, they “concluded that it should be addressed to the masses-the oppressed, struggling, victimized masses of America particularly the Black masses of America.” Although some of the women in The Sisterhood were already successful writers or editors at this point and the majority had college if not post-graduate degrees, they still saw the purpose of their work as being primarily to enrich and educate the Black “masses.” Though occurring apart from and after the Black radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s, The Sisterhood’s politics were rooted in Black liberation ideology and committed to empowering the working class and poor, not only the middle class or affluent.

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<sup>429</sup> Minutes from first three meetings, March 15, 1977, Alice Walker Papers. The Rose Library. Emory University. The minutes of the first three meetings, including the smaller luncheon meeting, were typed up and disseminated by Abike to all of the women who attended so far so that they would all have the same information at the next meeting on March 20.

The three women had a similarly expansive vision for the “purpose and scope” of their nascent magazine. They sought “To provide a publication that is literary in the broadest sense of the word.” Rather than being a strictly literary journal, they imagined its contents including:

- (a) The presentation of Black prose and poetry, articles about film, dance, theatre, music, the visual arts from the perspective of the creators. In short, American art as seen through the eyes of its creators.
- (b) The provision of the Black perspective about issues that affect us be it directly or indirectly, whether the issues are national or international in scope.
- (c) The provision of survival information- that is information about and pertaining to the provision of food, clothing and shelter.
- (d) The presentation of information about us – what we’re doing in this country and abroad.

In service to their broad and diverse intended audience, they planned an equally wide-ranging body of content. In addition to literary fiction and poetry, they wanted to include articles on other art forms, “from the perspective of the creators.” Coverage was to be artist-driven and inclusive of a variety of genres. In addition to its artistic content, the publication would contain “Black perspectives about issues which affect us,” “us” marking an international Black community and its shared interests. Thus the publication would not only fill a literary “gap” but also one in larger cultural and news coverage of issues of interest to Black audiences. The last two content items were in line with this

goal and the Black liberation politics undergirding it.<sup>430</sup> Thus this potential publication would serve multiple purposes, more than the *Times* or the *Voice* ever had.

The meeting concluded with a discussion of the potential name for this enterprise, having decided that they needed to set up a corporation prior to taking any further steps. Morrison “suggested ‘Sapphire Enterprises, Inc.’” a name intended to reclaim the negative moniker of stereotypical Black female lasciviousness and domineeringness for its original meaning, of a gemstone. When Ballard and Abike were not enthusiastic about Sapphire as a name, Morrison suggested “Kizzy Enterprises, Inc.” Kizzy, the name of the first member of the Kinte clan to be born in America in the 1977 miniseries *Roots*, played by singer/actress Leslie Uggams. Given that *Roots* had premiered the previous month, Kizzy seem to have resonated surprisingly strongly with the other women.<sup>431</sup> Abike wrote in the minutes, “The name was met with immediate approval and deemed extremely appropriate in view of the fact that we do consider ourselves here to stay—a group of Black women to be reckoned with and with an important history and legacy to pass on.”<sup>432</sup>

Although neither Kizzy Enterprises nor the proposed publication ever came to be, the ambitions and political commitments of the black women of the Sisterhood is significant both for their ambitious cultural agenda and their Black feminist solidarity and theorizing. Minutes of the next meeting, the second meeting of the full group, held

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<sup>430</sup> Minutes from first three meetings, March 15, 1977, Alice Walker Papers. The Rose Library. Emory University.

<sup>431</sup> Gumbs notes that Kizzy also means “roots,” which must have added additional appeal to the name.

<sup>432</sup> Minutes from first three meetings, March 15, 1977, Alice Walker Papers. The Rose Library. Emory University.

February 20, 1977, describe its “purpose” as “(a) to determine whether collective action would occur regarding the formation of the Black Poets and Writers organization and the alternative press; and (b) if so, the nature of the collective efforts.” According to the minutes, “The discussion which ensued as a result of the presentation of proposed action was important because for the first time we sought to more clearly define The Sisterhood and its relationship to [other] concerns.” Less than a month into the group’s existence, the members of The Sisterhood were not only establishing their mission but also pondering if and how they might turn their shared values into “collective action.” Although the initial impulse seemed to have been in part to form community among Black women writers and artists, this fellowship had immediately become political and activist in nature. The women decided to keep The Sisterhood as a group of Black women artists and writers “in the broadest sense of these words” instead of merging it with the proposed publication, Kizzy Enterprises, Inc., or the Black Poets and Writers Organization that had been discussed at previous meetings. Individual members “could act/participate according to their interests” in these projects or others, but it would not be a requirement nor a central part of the group. “This [resolution] would hopefully leave the association free to grow and pursue the all important purpose of unifying us and strengthening our bonds with one another through the sharing of ourselves, our art, our experiences, our food, our love and our ideas.”<sup>433</sup> The group would continue to discuss potential projects and collective action, but fellowship with other Black women was established as The Sisterhood’s primary purpose.

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid 6



At the March 20 meeting, individual women continued to suggest projects that the group or some members might take up. For example, “June Jordan proposed that an additional project of The Sisterhood should be setting up a center for battered black women.”<sup>434</sup> Zita Allen’s suggestion “that The Sisterhood try to influence major publications such as *Essence*, *Ms.*, *Ebony*, and *First World* to publish more young black poets and writers” spurred additional ideas and suggestions that seemed to have dominated the conversation. In a marked difference from the February meeting, where members had wanted to lobby mainstream publications, beginning at the March 20 meeting, The Sisterhood turned its attention to increasing representation of Black women writers and artists in Black (*Ebony*, *Essence*, *First World*) and feminist publications (*Ms.*). Because women in the group were already successful writers, Allen’s suggestion was met with offers from women to contact specific editors like Audreen Ballard and Marcia Gillespie, both at *Essence*.<sup>435</sup> In response to Allen’s proposal, “VeVe Clark suggested that a one-page package of work by a black poet or writer with her or his photo and a brief profile should be prepared to present to *Ebony*, in order to persuade the publication to publish a regular feature of poetry and/or prose.” Although the original proposal for Kizzy Enterprises, Inc. had been imagined as a place for all Black writers and poets, this new, targeted plan was centered around Black women writers.

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<sup>434</sup> “March 20, 1977 Meeting of the Sisterhood.” Series 1.2, Box 10, Folder 123. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid. Both of Ballard and Gillespie were Black women editors. Although *Essence* was founded and owned by a Black man, Black women held important editorial positions. Gillespie was named editor in chief of the magazine in 1971 at just twenty-six years old. That Jordan and Walker not only knew both editors but offered to reach out to them and the poetry and fiction editor Sharyn Skeeter, indicates not only that there were influential Black women in book and magazine publishing at this time but also that these women were part of networks with Black women writers and artists.

The group drafted an “in-house” proposal based on their March discussion.<sup>436</sup> The proposal lists the issue they seek to address, their proposed strategies, and includes a diagram mapping these issues and the publications involved. According to this document, the problem was “the general need for more responsive attitude from publishing houses and popular magazines [for black women writers].” The response to the problem was “nudging and challenging unresponsive resources in the black world (eg Ebony and Essence)” in order “to provide encouragement and exposure to both published and unpublished writers, photographers, researchers, and, particularly, poets.” The group proposed using *Ebony* as a test case for their strategy. They chose *Ebony* because it was one of the most well-known Black periodicals (both within the United States and internationally.)<sup>437</sup>

Their approach to entreating the magazine to feature more black women writers was in light with *Ebony*’s “decided[ly] visual” format. They needed to appeal to “the tastes and needs of [the magazine’s] mid-west constituents” who were used to the “SEE[ING] is BELIEVING” style of *Ebony*’s coverage. In line with Clark’s idea that they distribute packets of writers’ work with photos of them, the membership proposed two strategies. The first, which they called “SEE ME READ ME” consisted of “conforming to [the magazine’s visual] format” by “provid[ing] photographs of the poet and a short biography to draw readers (and before them, editors) into the poetry itself.” By demonstrating that writers featured, like the magazine’s readership, were Black and

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<sup>436</sup> “In-House Proposal: Publishing in Popular Magazines (re: meeting on 3/20/77 and toward meeting 4/10/77)” Alice Walker Papers. The Rose Library. Emory University.

<sup>437</sup> *ibid*

depicting them as humans with a larger body of work, the members of the Sisterhood hoped to enroll editors and magazine readers in seeking out writers' other work after reading selections within an issue.<sup>438</sup>

The second suggestion "PORTFOLIOS" was much closer to Clark's plan. In this model,

...the Sisterhood [would] take responsibility for organizing In-House portfolios for poets, writers, and others seeking to be published....Portfolios could then be sent directly to popular magazines where the format is decidedly different from literary or scholarly periodicals. If the Sisterhood sets a basic Portfolio style, with a log, and the quality of the graphic/photographic/poetic work is consistently good for six months, the Portfolios themselves will begin to get quick attention from editors they will begin to be recognized as another good round from the Sisterhood.

As in the "SEE ME READ ME" plan, the portfolios would use visuals, including headshots of writers, to garner attention and encourage publication and further reading. If the plan was successful, members hoped that the format would eventually function like a seal of approval. Editors would recognize that the quality of the writers the Sisterhood promoted and would be more likely to feature new writers as the group distributed their portfolios.<sup>439</sup>

This plan never seems to have been enacted in part because of logistical issues: Who would take the photos? Who would pay for them? Who would pay to mail them?

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<sup>438</sup> *ibid*

<sup>439</sup> *ibid*

And who would choose and recruit writers to publicize? The “in-house” nature of the proposals meant that the members of the Sisterhood would be responsible for implementing the plans themselves something that the loosely formed group did not appear to have the longevity or the resources to execute.

At the next meeting on April 10<sup>th</sup>, the members continued their discussion of possible ways to affect change in the publishing world. Clark “presented a written proposal for creating a black poets and writers feature in Ebony” after “ha[ving] researched every anniversary issue of Ebony over the past five years, in order to survey the magazine’s format and policies.” But most of the discussion about next steps was in sharp contrast to the In-House Memo’s clearly outlined plan. For example, Phyl Garland suggested that “individual members of The Sisterhood [should] write letters to the publications [that were not publishing enough writing by Black writers]”<sup>440</sup> Walker and Jefferson suggested that the group focus on publications other than *Ebony*—*First World* and *Chrysalis*, respectively). Other women volunteered as in the previous meeting to reach out to specific editors. Although their grand plans were unusual, the members of The Sisterhood were not alone in their investment in increasing the representation of Black writers in mainstream publishing. At this meeting, “Donna Simms announced that there will be a meeting next week of black women who are trying to get Heresies, the new feminist arts journal, to publish a black women’s art issue.”<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> April 10, 1977 Meeting of the Sisterhood. Box 10, Folder 123. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

<sup>441</sup> *ibid*

Simms's announcement seems to have been an invitation for interested members to attend the Heresies meeting, but it also speaks to the members' awareness of and overlap with other Black feminist groups and organizations. The minutes at the April meeting also reveal that members discussed the reaching out to other Black women's groups like BWOA (Black Women Organized for Action.)<sup>442</sup> This conversation continued at the May meeting. Members wanted to form connections with West Coast Black women artists and groups.<sup>443</sup> The Sisterhood sought to expand their network to the national level and leverage the expertise and connections of women outside of New York in the service of achieving their goals.

Though the women did not call the group or its mission feminist, I argue that its centering of relationships between women, concern with gender and racial equity in publishing, and the political beliefs of many of its members effectively made it a Black feminist group. Although the group's records never describe The Sisterhood as feminist, some members did at least see it that way. In 1977 after apparently attending a meeting, Michele Wallace described her reservations about the group in a letter to Alice Walker:

As for The Sisterhood, I find I must devote most of my time to my book if it is ever to be finished. Also I am a little disturbed by the way the thing is progressing. I promised myself a while back that I would never seriously commit my time to any organization that wasn't feminist and working toward the alleviation of the problems of black women. If it is to be a discussion groups for black women artists who understand that they are black women, then I may attend. But if the goal is to organize a publishing company that will reissue the out-of-print works of black men, and to found a magazine, which will give space

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<sup>442</sup> *ibid*

<sup>443</sup> May 15, 1977 Meeting of the Sisterhood. Box 10, Folder 123. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

to black men, I can't possibly imagine what I would be needed for. I can't understand why a group of black women would want to do something like that.<sup>444</sup>

In 1977, Wallace was working on the manuscript of her infamous book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and already called herself a Black feminist. Because the early meetings of The Sisterhood had discussed expanding reception and publishing opportunities for all Black writers and artists instead of Black women in particular, Wallace believed that the group's mission did not prioritize Black women and thus was not feminist in nature. The loose nature of membership and the relative chaos of the early meetings likely contributed to this impression.

Walker objected to Wallace's characterization of the group. In her response she wrote,

I don't understand any of your criticisms. The Sisterhood (which does not rest on me in any sense, or anyone's respect for me) has never been guilty – as far as I know – of being composed of black women who did not want to know this. (That they are black & women). ... As for what we discuss: We are black women, and the least that should mean is that among ourselves we discuss what we like.<sup>445</sup>

In refuting Wallace's characterization of the Sisterhood, Walker sheds light on the group's evolving mission. None of the women in the Sisterhood ignored or downplayed their gender identity in favor of their racial and ethnic identities as Wallace alleges and as

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<sup>444</sup> Letter to Alice Walker. March 25, 1977. Box 4. Folder 26. Michele Wallace Papers. The Schomburg Center. New York, NY.

<sup>445</sup> Letter from Alice Walker. April 7, 1977. Box 4. Folder 26. Michele Wallace Papers. Schomburg Center.

historians have argued in regards to Black women activists in the 1960s and 1970s. What is at stake for both women in this exchange is the dual nature of their identities, what Fran Beale described as “double jeopardy” and would later be described by Crenshaw’s term “intersectionality.” So although neither Wallace nor Walker used the word feminism, they evoke it. I made a purposeful choice to not call The Sisterhood a *proto*-Black feminist organization because by 1977 many Black women were already identifying themselves as Black feminists. But the Sisterhood did not discuss feminism per se as much or as explicitly as other groups did. They may not have called it that, but, nonetheless, the Sisterhood and its members were involved in creating and defining Black feminism for themselves.

Ultimately the Sisterhood did not implement their campaigns. The May minutes state that a meeting was planned for June 12, but I have not been able to locate minutes from that meeting or independently confirm that it occurred. The next meeting there is documentation for was to take place on December 18. Like the first meeting, the December meeting was framed as a festive occasion. In a postscript to the invitation for the meeting, Renita Weems described the group’s history, writing, “This group of women in the arts/arts-related fields began the early part of this year as a result of what was apparently various needs and hopes of its many members. Unfortunately many of us have fallen by the wayside for one reason or another. But we hope that all will make this one effort to come out and share in an area that is dear to all of us.”<sup>446</sup> The post-script reiterates the group’s mission but also hints at a decline in participation that was perhaps

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<sup>446</sup> Letter from Renita Weems. December 5, 1977. Box 10. Folder 123. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

occasioned by the summer months. Individual members would continue to do Black feminist work and produce Black feminist art, but the collective known as the Sisterhood seems to have ended sometime in late 1977 or early 1978. In 1978, Walker, one of the co-founders and a central figure and frequent host in the group, moved from New York to California, which may have been a contributing factor the group's apparent dissolution.

### *The Black Feminist Retreats*

The Combahee River Collective (CRC) was originally founded in 1973 as the Boston chapter of the NBFO. In 1975, the group split off from NBFO in part because the organization was apparently not politically radical enough and likely due, at least in part, to the NBFO's failure to become a vibrant national organization. Once they separated from NBFO, the group of Black feminists ceased calling themselves the "Boston Chapter" and renamed themselves after the successful raid led by Harriet Tubman during the Civil War. The group is remembered for their eponymous foundational political statement, which was first published in 1977. Although the original incarnation of the CRC had effectively disbanded by the late 1970s, members in Boston continued to be active in local politics and continued to meet to discuss their feminist politics. At the same time that the Sisterhood's meetings were coming to an end, three of the CRC women—Demitia Frazier, Barbara Smith, and Beverly Smith—founded their own group,



a series of weekend workshops and gatherings that they called the Black Feminist Retreats.

The impetus for the first retreat seems to have been the desire for a formal, centralized space to discuss Black feminism. According to Barbara Smith,

[The retreats] sort of came about as a brainstorm. We realized we wanted to meet with more Black feminists. In Boston, we had a very large group; but we knew that there was organizing going on going on in New York and in New Jersey and in Chicago and very similar places. So we put a call out and called our friends and basically that is what we did. We called everybody we knew who we thought might be interested in spending a weekend talking politics, playing cards, eating good food, and spending time together to give you the support and also give ourselves a sense of broader community.<sup>447</sup>

In the invitation to the first of the seven retreats held by the group from 1977 to 1980, Smith and the other organizers described the motivation for the events similarly: “We have had many experiences as members of an independent Black feminist collective during the past two and a half years, both discouraging and encouraging, all of which convince us of the absolute necessity for autonomous Black feminist analysis and practice which challenge racism, sexism, capitalism and heterosexism.”<sup>448</sup> The invitation laid out the importance of the burgeoning Black feminist movement with a sense of urgency. The letter explained the choice of a retreat as the mode for furthering this mission: “Because of the geographic separation from each other, we think that this

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<sup>447</sup> See Duchess Harris, “‘All of Who I am in the Same Place’: The Combahee River Collective.” *Womanist Theory and Research* 2.1 (1999), 14.

<sup>448</sup> First Retreat Invitation Letter, May 24, 1977. Barbara Smith Papers. The Lesbian Herstory Archives. Brooklyn, NY.

chance to meet with each other will be politically stimulating and spiritually regenerating. We also will have a chance to enjoy each other, talk, laugh, eat, dance and have a good time.”<sup>449</sup> The first retreat, and the subsequent ones, were a way to bring together “politically active” Black women who were geographically spread out in the northeast and, in the case of one participant, Chicago. Like the Sisterhood’s meetings, the retreats were not intended to be overly serious or dry; they were imagined as both an occasion for serious political work and also a space for Black women to build deep personal connections with each other. Both Smith’s later recollection and the invitation reflect the centrality of fun and community to these political gatherings.

The agendas for the retreat seem to have been created collaboratively by the organizers and participants. The organizers used the initial invitation letters to solicit suggestions from invitees and to encourage them to bring or send in any materials they thought might be of interest to retreat attendees.<sup>450</sup> These materials included participants’ own creative work as well as, “things that aren’t easily available everywhere e.g. pamphlets, unpublished papers, articles from newspapers and magazines, literature about organizations, in other words things of interest to Black feminists.”<sup>451</sup> This request indexes the central role of creative work to Black feminist theorizing and the curatorial labor required to ensure that the women had access to the same body of literature about Black feminism. By distributing materials, including the Combahee River Collective

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<sup>449</sup> *ibid*

<sup>450</sup> See letters dated May 24, June 12, and June 28, 1977, Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

<sup>451</sup> “Retreat Planning Letter,” June 28, 1977, Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

Statement, to retreat participants' the organizers attempted to make sure that all the attendees were working from the same set of assumptions and background in their workshops and discussions.

Subsequent letters about the first retreat provided additional information about the schedule and location and solicited participants' ideas for discussion topics. A retreat survey was distributed with one of these initial informational letters. The survey was used to gauge attendance, collect dietary information, and solicit suggested topics of discussion. Barbara Smith's papers housed at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn contain thirteen surveys that were filled out and returned by invited women. The suggested topics of discussion range from consciousness-raising groups to issues of lesbianism and homophobia among Black women. From these surveys and other responses and discussions, the organizers developed an agenda for the first retreat.<sup>452</sup> The schedule consisted of five sessions spread out over three days. The session topics were: WHAT'S BEEN DONE? WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW, WHAT WE WANT FOR THE FUTURE; THEORY AND ANALYSIS; ORGANIZING; ISSUES FOR ORGANIZING; and NETWORK BUILDING, FUTURE PLANS, SUMMING UP. Each of the session headings was accompanied by a description and/or possible sub-topics for discussion.<sup>453</sup>

The first session, held Friday evening, was to be, "A discussion of Black feminist and other political/ activity in which we've been involved. This will be a chance to share our experiences of the past few years with each other." This opening discussion seems to

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<sup>452</sup> Smith's papers include handwritten notes based on the survey suggestions in which she has divided different issues up into the eventual sessions.

<sup>453</sup> "Discussion Schedule," Barbara Smith Papers, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

have been designed to establish a shared foundation for the rest of the weekend's discussions. Saturday morning's session on "THEORY AND ANALYSIS," was to "begin with a discussion of the Combahee River Collective Statement as a means of focusing the first part of this session" and then continue onto other suggested topics. Invitation letters indicate that not all participants were familiar with the statement but prior to becoming a quotidian and foundational piece of feminist theorizing, the CRC women organizing the retreat saw it as a useful and crucial text around with to orient their discussion of Black feminist politics and activism.<sup>454</sup>

Saturday afternoon's sessions turned to organizing. The third session, titled "ORGANIZING," was both philosophical and logistical. Suggested topics range from "Is there a Black feminist movement?" to "developing new organizing skills for Black feminist revolution. The suggested topics demonstrate an awareness of the skills necessary to create and sustain an autonomous Black feminist movement as well as the plethora of ongoing issues that the attendees as Black feminists faced. Some of the suggested topics like "Is there a Black feminist movement?", "collectivism; is it a viable Black feminist mode?", and "Black feminists, white feminists: working out the knots" point towards an awareness of the other progressive movements these women were a part of and in conversation with as well as the potential complications of these connections. The fourth session, "ISSUES FOR ORGANIZING," also took place Saturday afternoon. It built off of the third session's themes to discuss actual causes around which Black feminist organizing was currently taking place and could take place in the future,

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<sup>454</sup> *ibid*

including “sterilization abuse” and domestic violence. The final session, held Sunday morning immediately prior to attendees leaving the site, was titled “NETWORK BUILDING, FUTURE PLANS, SUMMING UP.” The description of this session called for exploration of one of the impetuses for the retreat: “isolation” as well as “its effects and remedies.”<sup>455</sup>

Unlike subsequent retreats that were summarized in newsletters, much like the minutes from the Sisterhood’s meetings, the archive does not contain much reflection on the experience of the first retreat.<sup>456</sup> But a document in Lorde’s archives written during the first retreat reveals the potential she saw in the event. The retreat for Lorde as for the planners seems like the beginning of something larger. As such, Lorde writes,

I urge each of us as Black Feminists not to limit our examinations, our plans, our dreams, merely to reactive remedies. By this I mean that at the same time as we organize behind specific and urgent issues, we must also develop and maintain an ongoing vision, and the theory following upon that vision, of why we struggle – of the shape and taste and philosophy of what we wish to see.<sup>457</sup>

Lorde wishes to address pressing issues while pursuing big picture societal shifts. Her charge comes because, although she acknowledges that “important work is being done here” and states, “[I am] Taking my attendance here very seriously,” Lorde is wary of

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<sup>455</sup> *ibid*

<sup>456</sup> I have found records of the retreat (e.g. invitation letters and agendas) in the papers of Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Cheryl Clarke.

<sup>457</sup> Audre Lorde, “The First Black Feminist Retreat,” 7/6/77. Box 18. Folder 119. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College.

reproducing existing societal structures in the service of their proposed Black feminist revolution. She argues,

...we must give some of our energies also consistently to defining the shape of the future toward which we are working, as well as to a constant examination of the nature of the people we wish ourselves to be. For this is the background vision against which all issues must be seen. In what way can we cease to contribute to our own oppression? What hidden assumptions of the enemy have we eaten and made our own?<sup>458</sup>

Lorde's charge here echoes her essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House"; that any and all movements must interrogate their methods and effects against utopian goals and not just replace one ruling class with another.

The first retreat seems to have been a success as a second retreat was quickly planned for November of that same year. The second retreat, the first to officially be called a "Black Feminist Retreat," took place in New Jersey and was organized by "New York area women" as opposed to the original organizers from Boston. Cheryl Clarke, Cessie Alfonso, Linda Powell, and Camille Bristow organized the second retreat, which was held in Somerset, New Jersey. As at the first retreat each attendee was asked to pay a small registration fee to cover food, which the women cooked and ate communally. The

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<sup>458</sup> "The First Black Feminist Retreat." Box 18, Folder 119, Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

second retreat took place from Friday night, November 4<sup>th</sup> to Sunday afternoon, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1977.<sup>459</sup>

The agenda included an opening discussion Friday night, “The Personal Is Political,” three work sessions on Saturday, and a closing session for Evaluation and consideration of “Where Do We Go from Here?” on Sunday. There were “Bodywork/Exercise” sessions on Saturday and Sunday mornings.<sup>460</sup> The inclusion of exercise sessions points to the holistic nature of these retreats—the mind, the body, and the soul were engaged and nurtured. Years later, participants still recall how good the food was and how much fun was had.<sup>461</sup>

Although it does not appear on the pre-circulated agenda, there was apparently a workshop on lesbianism held during the retreat. The contents of the workshop were documented by Cheryl Clarke and circulated as part of the Second Black Feminist Retreat newsletter. The workshop was an opportunity to discuss what it meant to be a Black lesbian for participants. The conversation was wide-ranging. The discussion included self-conscious consideration of how “woman-identified-woman relationships” were central to their feminist praxis and perhaps also how those relationships were enacted at the retreat.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>459</sup> “Re: November 4-5 Black Feminist Retreat,” Box 46. Folder 14. Audre Lorde Papers, Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

<sup>460</sup> *ibid*

<sup>461</sup> “Inside the Continuum: The Combahee River Collective and Black Feminist Foundations.” March 25, 2016. University of Massachusetts, Amherst.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2NH0FW61LY>>.

<sup>462</sup> Cheryl Clarke. “Visions of Black Lesbianism.” Box 2. Folder 15. Barbara Smith Papers. Lesbian Herstory Archives.

It is notable that Clarke turns to literary examples to explain how Black women's upbringing and relationships to women in their families enables or inhibits woman-identified-woman relationships later on in life. Clarke cites Toni Cade Bambara's short story collection Gorilla, My Love and Toni Morrison's novels (likely The Bluest Eye and Sula) as models of Black women's coming-of-age and learned self-hatred.<sup>463</sup> Her hailing of Black women's literature as a resource reflects the centrality of writing to Black feminism as a movement and also how it would become central to the retreats.

That the notes from the Lesbianism workshop are included in the newsletter speaks to their importance. If the participants and Clarke, who transcribed the minutes, did not think them significant, surely they would not have been featured. I want to suggest that the existence and then documentation of this workshop illustrates the integration of the personal and the political at the Black Feminist Retreats. The contents of the workshop covered individual women's experiences as well as their significance to larger movement politics and the logistics of organizing amongst Black women. Workshop participants also discussed perceived barriers to Black feminist and Black lesbian feminist organizing and how they, as "radical black lesbian-feminists," could work to alleviate them. Their discussion was structural. Clarke is careful to note that they "did not talk about individual relationships with the women in our lives, except by way of allusion." The lesbianism workshop was very much about movement building. But in her notes, Clarke does "suggest that space be given to the topic of 'relationships' at the Third

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<sup>463</sup> *ibid*



Retreat.”<sup>464</sup> Although the focus of the workshop was on larger structures, participants acknowledged the importance of also addressing romantic and personal relationships as part of their work together. The lesbianism workshop combined activism with interpersonal bonding and sisterhood work, which was characteristic of the retreats.

As a result of the merging of personal and larger movement politics, the Black Feminist retreats quickly became opportunities for collective action. At the second retreat, Linda Powell apparently raised the possibility of members participating in the Brooklyn College Women’s Center’s upcoming conference on “Race, Sex, and Class.” Although they provisionally agreed to pursue the idea, after the retreat the women reconsidered. In a letter dated January 9, 1978, participants outlined their concerns about moving forward. The letter identified “two essential questions”:

- 1) What are our long and short goals for the Black Feminist Retreat Group – “Interim Combahee River Collective”? What do we see as possible “institutional” goals, directions, structure, decision making processes, etc.? How fast, if at all, do we want to move in these directions?
- 2) How, if at all, could this kind of conference serve our short or long goals?

The letter solicited members’ thoughts and invited them to share their concerns with Powell, Carroll Oliver, or Cheryl Clarke and to attend a dinner on January 20<sup>th</sup> at Oliver’s house in preparation for a meeting with the women from Brooklyn College about planning the conference that was to be held the next day.<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> *ibid*

<sup>465</sup> Letter from Linda Powell. January 9 1978. Box 2. Folder 15. Barbara Smith Papers. Lesbian Herstory Archives.

The Second Retreat Newsletter distributed in January contained Lorde's response to this plan. Ultimately, Lorde advises against collaborating with Brooklyn College on the conference. The primary reason she gives for her position is that such a collaboration would "Primarily achieve...the education and better understanding on the part of white feminists," which "is not the primary focus of [the] group."<sup>466</sup> Lorde explains her own reluctance to talk with groups of white women about racism after many years of doing so because it rarely yields the desired result. Instead, she argues that the group's energy would be better spent on "dealing with our own inter-family shit," by which she meant issues amongst Black women. Thus, she writes, "as a group attempting a real black women's cohesive approach to the theory and practice of our own liberation, I would question the wisdom of devoting our energies to this conference at this time."

Lorde's description of the challenges of relationships between Black women lays out the stakes of the group's supposed mission:

I am much more interested in attempting to deal with and root out the ways in which we, as black women, have internalized many of those same racist distortions in dealing with each other. They only serve to separate and weaken us, until we are our own worst enemies, without realizing it, sometimes...If we do not face this problem squarely, we are not keeping faith with ourselves nor each other in our quest for power and a future wherein our visions can bear fruit. We must 'wife' our energies into addressing those problems which make us wipe each other away so easily in so many painful and devious ways.

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<sup>466</sup> Audre Lorde. "Comments and Responses: The Brooklyn Women's Center Conference Issue." *The Second Black Feminist Retreat Newsletter*. Box 47. Folder 380. The Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

Lorde argues that it is only by focusing on their relationships with each other, rather than with white feminists, that the women participating the Black Feminist Retreats will be able to successfully build their own Black feminist movement. Black women must first “overcome these barriers to our own development as a cohesive force within or together with other movements” before pursuing connections with “other groups,” like the white women of the Brooklyn Women’s Center. Lorde believed the work they did at the retreats and afterwards together as a group of Black women was special and should be prioritized over cross-racial organizing with white women.<sup>467</sup>

After stating her case against collaborating on the proposed conference, Lorde concludes her letter by drawing attention to what else she has included along with it: a copy of her paper “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Absence,” that she had delivered at the annual MLA conference in December and a copy of her poem “Litany for Survival.” Lorde’s writing appeared alongside an essay “On Black Feminism and Culture” by Carroll Oliver, Cheryl Clarke’s poem “Fathers,” and announcements such as upcoming conferences, readings, and an update on Assata Shakur’s situation and an entreaty to “write her letters of support and encouragement.”<sup>468</sup> The juxtaposition of these texts and their distribution to the retreat attendees demonstrate how conversations at the retreats continued afterwards and between them, exceeding the boundaries of their weekend events. Furthermore, they reflect the variety of issues and levels that participants were concerned about, ranging from interpersonal and family dynamics as in Clarke’s poem to larger societal issues like announcement about the “conference on

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<sup>467</sup> *ibid*

<sup>468</sup> “Update on Assata Shakur.” *Ibid*.

battered women in Wash., D.C.” that Alfonso included in the “INFORMATION” section at the end of the newsletter.<sup>469</sup>

Perhaps the most important consequence of the second retreat was the drafting of a now infamous letter to *Heresies* about the lack of Third World women in its recent issue featuring lesbian art and artists.<sup>470</sup> The letter is dated November 4, 1977, during the second retreat, and the signatories were all in attendance. Thus the letter was evidently drafted and signed as part of political organizing at the second retreat. This document prompted *Heresies* to devote an entire issue to Third World Women, the first of several issues focusing on race and difference. In that sense, the collective strength of the Black Feminist Retreat Group was awesome. Gathering together with a shared purpose allowed them to express their frustration with other entities clearly and to enact change. If having one woman sign a letter could be effective, having ten or more do so was certain to get someone’s attention. The meeting about *Heresies* mentioned in the minutes of the Sisterhood’s April 10 meeting seems to have been organized by the New York area women from the Black Feminist Retreats. As the retreats continued, participants would leverage the power and resources of the collective to spread awareness, support activist causes, and publish Black feminist writings.

The Second Black Feminist Newsletter also included information about the third retreat, which was already scheduled for March 24-26 of 1978 in the Boston area. The schedule was quite similar to the previous two retreats and included workshops on

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<sup>469</sup> “Announcements.” Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Letter to Lesbian Issue Collective. November 4, 1977. Barbara Smith Papers. Herstory Archives. Brooklyn, NY.

various topics. The topics of events were more wide ranging and some were to be led by specific women. For example, Demita Frazier led a workshop on “The Politics of Food” seemingly at the same time that Barbara Smith reported on the International Women’s Year conference in Houston, which she had attended. By the third retreat, there were apparently enough attendees for concurrent sessions and activities specifically designed for smaller groups.<sup>471</sup>

The third retreat was unique in that two special events—a cultural sharing on Friday night and a party on Saturday night—had been planned. Named on the agenda as “The Flowers Unfurling,” the event Friday was apparently an occasion for “Sharing our cultural gifts” and attendees were encouraged to “Bring your creative works, whatever they are—singing, songs, writing, story telling, dances, instruments... Whatever!!!”<sup>472</sup> Attendees enjoyed these additions to the schedule. Sharing their art alongside their activism was another way to build community and counter the isolation they often felt as Black feminists outside of the retreats. Afterwards Clarke wrote, “Reading my poems to an all-black woman audience is something I have never had the opportunity to do.”<sup>473</sup> Similarly, although she was somewhat disappointed by the feedback she received on her work, Lorraine Bethel expressed her excitement about the opportunity to share her work

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<sup>471</sup> “Agenda: Third Black Feminist Retreat.” Box 2. Folder 14. Barbara Smith Papers. Lesbian Herstory Archives.

<sup>472</sup> “Agenda: Third Black Feminist Retreat”

<sup>473</sup> Cheryl Clarke. “The Third Feminist Retreat.” Box 47. Folder 346. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

because, “I see our group as the women I write for.”<sup>474</sup> The intra-racial space of the retreats was unlike anything most attendees experienced elsewhere.

The third retreat saw an expansion of the “assignments,” specifically material for the women to read ahead of time. At the first retreat, the Combahee River Collective statement had been the only shared text and served as a starting point for a workshop around Black feminism. Assigned readings for the third retreat appear to have included readings on lesbian separatism, a speech by Barbara Ehrenreich and essays from the lesbian magazine *The Ladder*.<sup>475</sup> The document that contains this list of readings lists “discussions of common reading and compiling a read/audio/visual” as a planned part of third retreat schedule.<sup>476</sup> Lorde’s letter, printed in the Second Black Feminist Newsletter, implies that this was part of an ongoing project at the retreats to collect and share reading materials. Her letter includes a list of eight texts, which she labeled “Additions to the booklist.” The list includes Bambara’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel *No Sweetness Here*, and literary critic Addison Gayle’s *The Black Aesthetic*. The booklist she references appears to have been an ongoing project and formalized way for retreat attendees to share what they were reading or had found helpful.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> Letter from Lorraine Bethel. April 27 [1978].

<sup>475</sup> Planning notes for the Third Black Feminist Retreat. Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA. This document appears to be part of a newsletter sent to participants and also includes information about the retreat logistics and recent events.

<sup>476</sup> *ibid*

<sup>477</sup> Audre Lorde. “Comments and Responses: The Brooklyn Women’s Center Conference Issue.” *The Second Black Feminist Retreat Newsletter*. Box 47. Folder 380. The Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

The collecting and sharing of reading materials appears to have been a precursor to the idea that the retreat participants create their own publication. Like the Sisterhood, the women of the Black Feminist Retreats eventually turned to publishing as a means to spread and enact their Black feminist politics. Early discussions about the content and a shape of a “resource packet” or “periodical” seem to have begun at the third retreat and continued in the correspondence among participants in the weeks afterwards.<sup>478</sup>

In an undated letter she wrote in response to the third retreat, Clarke writes, “I suppose I am happiest about our decision to publish. My feeling is that we should get the materials together with a degree of urgency... I am very excited about this project and I think the work we will each put into it is exactly what we need to draw us closer and keep us struggling together in a feminist network, a black feminist network.”<sup>479</sup> Gwen Braxton listed the publication as one of five “ongoing” “task areas” related to and inspired by the retreats. She writes,

The primary purpose of this periodical would be to create a forum for Black women to dialogue re feminism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism and any other issues of importance to Black women. It would also provide a place for Black women to share information re Black women’s activities throughout the world, exchange ideas re solving organizing/organizational and other problems; publish Black women’s writing. It should also include information re activities of other groups that would be of interest [to] Black women.<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> An extended list of readings dated January 1978 apparently generated by a prompt that the “New York-New Jersey women” each list ten books exists in Barbara Smith’s papers.

<sup>479</sup> “The Third Feminist Retreat.” Letter from Cheryl Clarke. Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

<sup>480</sup> Gwen Braxton. “OUR FUTURE.” Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

Both Clarke and Braxton's comments point to how the goal for the publication was similar to that of the retreats: to connect Black women who were geographically separated from each other and to disseminate Black feminist writing and thought. Furthermore the "task" or "project" of assembling the publication, whether it was a one-off endeavor or part of a series, as Braxton suggested, would be a way to sustain the retreat members' conversations with each other. Bethel wrote she was "pleased that we have a project to work on."<sup>481</sup> Linda Powell believed the publication reflected the group's development: "It appears to me that we have worked through some very basic 'relationship' issues, and are better prepared to move to some of the more thorny 'political' ones... Now, I'm ready to test what I consider the strength of the group and check some of our untapped resources."<sup>482</sup> The women had connected with each other and now they would turn their focus and energy outwards to, as Clarke put it, "reach those black women most in need of our analysis and view of the world."<sup>483</sup>

Like the Sisterhood, the retreat women were ambitious and immediately began planning for their publication. Clarke went so far as to "hope that every contributor will have a finished product or some reasonable facsimile by [their next retreat in] July."<sup>484</sup> Individual women suggested topics they would like to write on, set goals for a timeline, discussed how they would go about organizing the publication. There was no consensus about the exact form the publication would take. Beverly Smith believed, "it should

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<sup>481</sup> Letter from Lorraine Bethel. April 27 [1978]. Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

<sup>482</sup> Letter from Linda Powell. April 28 1978. Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

<sup>483</sup> Cheryl Clarke. "The Third Feminist Retreat."

<sup>484</sup> *ibid.*



definitely be newspaper (tabloid) size and format. This is a size that even women who “don’t read” may feel comfortable with.”<sup>485</sup> Powell insisted, “It will not be a ‘journal’—it will be a workbook,” and advocated for making the publication “free and widely available.”<sup>486</sup>

In addition to concerns about the financial realities of printing something, several women emphasized the need to maintain a cooperative and democratic process. One participant wrote, “Figuring out how we can work together in conscious and principled way is crucial as we become involved in our “printed resource” project.”<sup>487</sup> Braxton echoed her sentiment writing, “I would like for us to develop some awareness of how we as a group make decisions.”<sup>488</sup> Braxton’s hopes for the ethos behind the publication and the running of the group overlap. She writes,

All of our activities should be designed to encourage dialogue; begin where Black women are, open to different perspectives. We should encourage the development of creative flexible democratic leadership styles. We should avoid rhetoric, propaganda, rigid ideology and academic language. We should be as clear, concise and concrete as possible. As much as possible we should engage in and encourage analysis, self-education, sharing of resources (including knowledge/skills); communication, economic independence and evaluation.<sup>489</sup>

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<sup>485</sup> Beverly Smith. “Thoughts on the Last Retreat.” Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

<sup>486</sup> Letter from Linda Powell. April 28 1978. Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

<sup>487</sup> “Thoughts on the Last Retreat.” Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

<sup>488</sup> Gwen Braxton. “OUR FUTURE.” Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

<sup>489</sup> *ibid*

Braxton's vision for the group is decidedly feminist prioritizing accessibility, shared responsibility, and group decision-making. This rhetoric is identical to that of other second-wave feminist groups with the notable difference being that the retreats were planned and attended only by Black women. As in other moments, we see that Black feminists explicitly embraced much the language and ideology of the second-wave even though their agendas were more racially inclusive and politically radical.

Anxieties about the logistics of organizing the proposed publication reflected concerns about the maintaining the integrity of the retreats as they grew. Should they continue to invite women to join? Should they make explicit invitations? Should they reach out to other Black feminists? Correspondence among retreat attendees in the aftermath of the third and fourth retreats reveals tensions. Lorde and Bethel exchanged letters about some incident that had caused Bethel significant stress at the third retreat.<sup>490</sup> Lorde also sent a letter to Smith after the fourth retreat evidently in response to some disagreement the two of them had had.<sup>491</sup>

According to a letter written by Lorde, a group of eleven women met in May in New York at Powell's residence prior to the fourth retreat to discuss the publication. Although they had high hopes, "There were not enough members present for effective collective planning." As Lorde suggested, the fourth retreat in July became the occasion to complete, "those tasks which we had hoped to accomplish last weekend, such as

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<sup>490</sup> Letters dated May 9 and May 12 1978. Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

<sup>491</sup> This disagreement was likely around the nature of their relationship and/or sexual and romantic attachments within the group. Lorde's free and fluid sexuality apparently clashed with Smith's and other attendees' beliefs that romantic entanglements between members could prove problematic. See De Veaux 218-219.

decision-making concerning mechanics, length, cost, distribution, etc, and we need all our collective skills.”<sup>492</sup>

Lorde’s letter included another list of proposed articles. Many topics appeared with names attached of women who had already volunteered. Although further along than other women’s lists and collaboratively produced, the contents of the proposed publication were still in flux. Lorde instructs members of the retreat groups to, “feel free to choose from these as well as those other topics which you are already thinking and working” and also notes “Some of these [topics] may lend themselves to collective writing.”<sup>493</sup>

The publication seems to have been a major topic of discussion at the fourth retreat held in July of 1978. The first day of the retreat was devoted to meditations on the group and its future in large and small groups, concluding with a discussion of “Visions of the Future; What we want do to as a group in the future, public speaking, writing, etc, who do we want to reach and for what purpose?” But the second day’s agenda was allocated solely to working on the written resource. Rather than a series of specific workshops and group sessions, the agenda for Saturday includes one large group session to discuss the “purpose of this written resource and who we wish to reach” and then the “balance of [the] day” was set aside for discussing the publication: “Issues to be addressed;” “Sharing & discussion of materials brought/or in preparation”; “Mechanics-format, layout, typing, length, editing, cost, distribution, etc., who, how?”;

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<sup>492</sup> Letter from Audre Lorde. May 24, 1978. Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives. Atlanta, GA.

<sup>493</sup> *ibid*

“FUNDRAISING for above and other”; Resources- contacts, individual skills, interests, experience”; and “Status of Treasury.” The final day, Sunday, consisted mostly of packing up and moving to the apartment where they would spend the final remainder of their time as the family whose house they were using returned on Sunday.<sup>494</sup>

The newsletter compiled by Angela Wilson and Clarke and sent after the fourth retreat included what is apparently the now consensus-produced list of articles for the publication. There is significant overlap between this list and the one Lorde circulated in May. Additional writers have been added to some pieces but others—“Young women,” “Incarcerated Black Women,” “Lesbian Welfare Mother,” and “Motherhood and Childhood”—have “nobody” assigned to them. Annotations indicate that Frazier would be responsible for locating someone to write the piece on young women and Lorde would look for someone to author the piece on the “Lesbian Welfare Mother.” Rough drafts of each piece were to be brought to the “Interim Retreat Meeting” on September 23 at Lorde’s house on Staten Island. The purpose of this meeting was “to make decisions about the division of labor re publication.”<sup>495</sup> It is unclear if this meeting ever took place.

The next Black Feminist Retreat would not be held for almost a full year. The gap in the events that had previously been held roughly three to four months apart could be a result of several factors. Letters written after the third retreat indicate that some sort of strife was impacting the group, likely around romantic and sexual relationships between

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<sup>494</sup> “Fourth Black Feminist Retreat July 21-23, 1978: Agenda.” Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

<sup>495</sup> Audre Lorde. “To the members of the Black Feminist Advance Group.” May 24 1978. Box 47. Folder 386. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archives.

group members.<sup>496</sup> Outside events also dominated some attendees' lives. In January of 1979, the first of a series of murders, primarily of Black women, began in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston. The core group of CRC women in Boston were deeply involved in activism around these killings. CRC members, including Barbara Smith, staged marches, public actions, and distributed pamphlets to raise awareness. The murders, eleven in all, continued through May. CRC activism continued this entire period and even afterwards, when Barbara Smith suggested that the fifth retreat be linked to the Collective's activism around the murders.<sup>497</sup> January of 1979 was also when Lorde officially resigned her post as poetry editor at *Chrysalis* after months of discord and the strife between her and the editorial board continued for several more months. At the same time, Barbara Smith and Bethel were working on *Conditions 5: The Black Women's Issue*, soliciting and editing the contents.

Although the year between the fourth and fifth retreats were busy for individual women, they continued to correspond and support each other. The relationships formed by the retreats, groups like them, and simply the impetus to make connections with other Black women, especially Black feminist writers, exceeded the bounds of the individual events. Lorde and Parker first met when Lorde was in California for a reading and asked to meet other Black feminists in the area.<sup>498</sup> Their correspondence continued up until Parker's death in 1989 and they visited each other multiple times and frequently spoke via telephone. Similarly, Barbara Smith and Lorde continued to correspond during the

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<sup>496</sup> De Veaux 218-219

<sup>497</sup> *ibid* 241

<sup>498</sup> Letter to Willie Coleman. 28 June 1975. Pat Parker Papers, Box 2, Folder 18, Schlesinger Library.

lull in retreats. These letters detailed CRC's activism, the progression of work on *Conditions 5*, Smith's struggles to do her own writing, and even a discussion of the challenges of dating white women. Letters written during this same period between Lorde and others, such as June Jordan, chronicle her conflict with Chrysalis. These diverse sets of correspondence illustrate how relationships between individual women created larger networks and allowed Black feminists to support each other. Jordan's letters to Lorde from this time are frequently CC'd to her, sent in support of her to the women at Chrysalis and often to other women to encourage them to write in. Similarly Lorde drew on her contacts to send out a mailing to fifty people soliciting submissions for *Conditions 5*, a network that Smith and Bethel evidently did not have access to. In 1975, Michele Wallace had utilized this strategy of letter writing to attempt to pressure *Ms.* into featuring more Black women artists and writers. Wallace went so far as to explicitly solicit letters of support from her colleagues and provide them with Gloria Steinem's contact information.<sup>499</sup> These letters reflect only a fraction of the ways that Black feminists leveraged intra-racial networks for personal and professional support. And they demonstrate the intimacy of these relationships between Black women and the pleasure these relationships brought them.<sup>500</sup>

The fruits of these relationships and the work they supported were evident at the Fifth Black Feminist Retreat. The fifth retreat was held from July 6-8 in Cambridge,

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<sup>499</sup> See Michele Wallace Papers, Schomburg Center.

<sup>500</sup> See Mecca Jamilah Sullivan, "Introduction: 'I think you changed the world': Black Lesbian Feminism in Love and Letters." *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, 1974-1989* and Barbara and Beverly Smith, "'I am Not Meant to Be Alone and Without You Who Understand: Letters from Black Feminists, 1972-1978.'" *Conditions 4* (1978): 62-77.

Massachusetts. Two poetry readings, “benefits for the organizations working in response to the murders of 12 Black women in Boston” earlier that year, were organized and held as part of the fifth retreat. The schedule was similar to earlier retreats with time allotted for brainstorm, discussions, and cultural sharing. The notes from the closing discussion reflect both the continuing concern with publications and also the increased reach of the network. The announcements section includes information about contributing to special issues of *Frontiers* and *Heresies* (correspondence after the fourth retreat had included information about how to contribute to *Conditions* 5). But an entire section of the minutes is devoted to the “Beacon Press Book on Black Feminism.”<sup>501</sup>

Evidently, an editor at Beacon Press had approached Barbara and Beverly “about doing a book on Black feminism.”<sup>502</sup> Although the press originally wanted co-authored book, Barbara and Beverly wanted to do a collection of pieces, an anthology.<sup>503</sup> Because the group had discussed doing their own publication, the Smith sisters presented their own project at the retreat, although I was “still in the negotiating stages.”<sup>504</sup> The two sisters brought a proposal for the book, titled “Black Feminism: A Resource Book” with them to the retreat.

It is not clear if Barbara and her sister Beverly had continued working on the retreat group’s publication idea or if this was an entirely different project. But Gumbs has

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<sup>501</sup> “Agenda: Fifth Black Feminist Retreat.” Box 47. Folder 415. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archive.

<sup>502</sup> “Notes: Closing Discussion Fifth Black Feminist Retreats, July 8, 1979.” Audre Lorde Papers. Box 47. Folder 12. Spelman College Archive.

<sup>503</sup> Letter from Barbara Smith. November 15, 1979. Box 5. Folder 125. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archive.

<sup>504</sup> “Notes: Closing Discussion Fifth Black Feminist Retreats, July 8, 1979.”

argued that the proposal “is clearly informed by the earlier set of topics to be covered in the resource manual.”<sup>505</sup> The Smith sister’s proposal shares some topics with the retreat group’s ideas for their publication, including sections on Black women’s self-hatred, the experience of young black women, Black women and welfare, and pieces on Black women’s physical and mental health. Although there is overlap in content and in the women involved in both publications, they are markedly different. As Gumbs notes, the proposal for “Black Feminism: A Resource Book” “seems to seek to do it all.”<sup>506</sup> While still intended for a “broad audience,” the Smith sister’s book would have eight sections, each containing multiple chapters. The first section, “Defining Black Feminism,” would include historical documents related to Black feminism going as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another section title “Roadblocks to Liberation,” would contain articles on “Anti-feminism and homophobia in the Black Community” and demonstrative selections from Black male writers’ work (e.g. Ishmael Reed, Ed Bullins, Robert Staples, etc.). I agree with Gumbs who notes that the proposal seems to be far too ambitious and comprehensive for a single book. Ultimately, like the retreat women’s original proposal, the Smith sister’s book, at least in this form, was never published.

The Sixth Black Feminist Retreat was held in Massachusetts in September of 1979. The Seventh was held in Washington, D.C. in February of 1980. The archive contains very few documents about the final two retreats. I have only found postcards sent by Beverly Smith to determine the best possible date for the sixth retreat and agendas for the sixth and seventh retreats. I have not found explanations for the

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<sup>505</sup> Gumbs 462-463.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid 463



conclusion of the retreats in correspondence between retreat attendees. I can only assume that the retreats likely ended because participants became too busy with other projects. Even though the retreats ended, the participants continued working in Black feminism—Clarke joined the editorial collective at *Conditions* magazine, Lorde continued to write and publish prolifically, and, most significantly, several retreat participants founded Kitchen Table Press, the first press devoted to publishing work by Third World women. The intra-racial networks Black feminists developed in the 1970s were key to the flourishing of Black feminist thought in the 1980s, especially in the realm of publishing.

*“We Have to Do Something About Publishing”*

*Conditions Five: The Black Women’s Issue* was published in the fall of 1979. Shortly after its release, Barbara Smith described her excitement about the issue in a letter to Lorde. She wrote, “I am very excited about CL:5. The dream has become a reality. I want so much for it to be a bestseller and for Black women to find it. I feel so frustrated that most of the Black women who need it will not see it.”<sup>507</sup> Like the publications imagined by the retreat women and the Sisterhood, Smith believed that *Conditions Five* should be accessible to all Black women and was most needed by those least likely to find it—the poor, the incarcerated, those outside of feminist organizing, etc. She believed this not just because she felt the issue was important, in another letter

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<sup>507</sup> Letter from Barbara Smith. November 16 1979.

she calls the issue a “landmark,” but because of the need it served, the void it filled. It was a void Smith herself had experienced and even written about at length. This void—the lack of available works about and by women of color, particularly Black women—contributed to Black feminists’ feelings of isolation. By publishing and making available texts about Black feminism by Black feminists, Smith and her comrades not only spread Black feminist thought but also created Black feminist community for women who were still geographically separated from each other.

Smith has told the story of the inception of Kitchen Table Press (KTP), the first press devoted to publishing women of color, many times over the years. But each iteration remains essentially the same. She says that sometime in the fall of 1980, she was talking to Lorde on the phone when Lorde said, “We have to do something about publishing.” Smith explains the thinking behind Lorde’s utterance as being about the means of production. Black women including Smith herself had been able to publish in feminist and lesbian feminist periodicals and publications, but “none of them were women-of-color run.”<sup>508</sup> It was from this impetus that KTP sprang. According to Smith,

Kitchen Table Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us. As feminist and lesbian of color writers, we knew that we had no options for getting published except at the mercy or whim of

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<sup>508</sup> Barbara Smith, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of video recording, May 7, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, 75.

others-in either commercial or alternative publishing, since both are white dominated.<sup>509</sup>

Thus for Black feminist like Smith and Lorde, publishing was not merely about representation but about connection. As I argue in the second chapter, feminist publishing networks were crucial to the spread of second wave feminism in the U.S. during the 1970s, in the 1980s as independent feminist presses collapsed they would become perhaps even more so, but also would begin to serve Black feminists and other women of color who had previously not been represented.

The press itself was founded later that fall at Boston in Smith's home, although they did not choose a name nor did they announce the press's founding until a year later at the second Women in Print Conference.<sup>510</sup> Although only Black (African American and Afro-Caribbean) women were at this first meeting, the group decided, "to publish all women of color."<sup>511</sup> This commitment made KTP the first ever press run by and dedicated to publishing women of color and it is not insignificant that it was founded by queer Black feminists.

According to Smith, KTP got its name, "because the kitchen is in the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other. We also wanted to convey the fact that we are a kitchen table, grass roots operation, begun and kept alive by women who cannot rely on inheritances or other benefits of class

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<sup>509</sup> Barbara Smith, "A Press of Our Own: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* Vol. 10, No. 3 (1989), 11.

<sup>510</sup> Enszer "The whole naked truth of our lives", 208.

<sup>511</sup> Smith, "A Press of Our Own," 11.

privilege to do the work we need to do.”<sup>512</sup> As a name, Kitchen Table marks both the press’s status as independent “grassroots operation” with limited access to capital and its communal nature. Like a family, gathered around a kitchen table, the press and its staff were bonded by friendship, shared politics, and a commitment to publishing work by women of color. Thus KTP was animated by similar affective impulses as the Sisterhood and the Black feminist retreats; they were doing it for themselves they needed it and because no one else would.

The press’s mission was explicitly political. Smith has described KTP “both an activist and a literary publisher.”<sup>513</sup> Not only was KTP “the only publisher in North American committed to publishing and distributing the writing of Third World Women of all racial/cultural heritages, sexualities, and classes,” it also published “work of high artistic quality that simultaneously contributes to the liberation of women of color and all people.”<sup>514</sup> Both the content of the titles and act of publishing them were meant to change the world.

KTP were not the only group of Black feminists to realize and articulate the importance of publishing to women of color. For example, *Azalea: A Magazine for Third World Lesbians* was founded by Gibbs, Robin Christian, and Linda Brown, three Black lesbians. In 1977 in a letter to Audre Lorde, Joan Gibbs explained her motivation in founding *Azalea: A Magazine for Third World Lesbians*: “The main one is probably that I feel that most of the magazines in existence don’t relate or deal with the issues most

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<sup>512</sup> *ibid*

<sup>513</sup> *ibid* 12

<sup>514</sup> *ibid*

important to Third World Women. Also I think it is about time that we had our own outlet for ideas and worked towards developing theories and ideas that related very loosely to our history-experience as women who are oppressed as women, and also as Third World people and as lesbians.”<sup>515</sup> Gibb’s prescient vision for an autonomous venue for the voices of women of color in 1977 anticipated the importance of independent publications for advancing Black and Third World Women’s feminist thought and communities.

Over the course of *Azalea*’s first two years, the editorial collective repeatedly elaborated on their mission. In the second issue, they wrote, “We are publishing this magazine so Third World Lesbians will have a space of their (our) own.”<sup>516</sup> In addition to publishing poets, short stories, nonfiction prose, and art by Third World lesbians, *Azalea* encouraged its readers to publish and provided information about copyright protections.<sup>517</sup> The collective also held conferences for Third world Lesbian Writers. They described first conference, held in 1979, as “both a benefit for *Azalea* and an opportunity for us (Lesbians of color and others who would like to join us) to get together and share our work.”<sup>518</sup>

By the spring of 1980, they believed “AZALEA has become a literary and artistic tool where womyn can get criticism of their work, expound on ideas and give each other much needed encouragement. There is energy for starting new projects and improving

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<sup>515</sup> Letter from Joan Gibbs. October 15 1977. Box 2. Folder 44. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archive.

<sup>516</sup> *Azalea* 1.2 (1978)

<sup>517</sup> Robin Christian. “Copyright Procedures.” *Azalea* 2.1 (Winter 1978-1979), 1.

<sup>518</sup> *Azalea* 2.1

existing ones.” In the spring 1980 issue of *Azalea* (vol. 3, no. 2), they elaborated on the advantages of “Publishing Ourselves.” In addition to describing the difficult work of publishing and their “non-elitist, non-oppressive” editorial policies, they wrote, “we have realized the power that comes from defining ourselves and making our own spaces.” Furthermore, they “urge all sisters to cultivate this power; share and refine it; and to make many vehicles for ourselves as 3<sup>rd</sup> world lesbians.”<sup>519</sup> This statement was accompanied by a reprint of the copyright instructions from an earlier issue. The back cover of the spring 1980 issue featured an illustration of a printing press and the words “Be independent, publish your own work.” I list the recurrences of *Azalea*’s discussion about self-publishing and copyright to highlight not only how for the editors, like the women of the Sisterhood and the Black Feminist Retreat participants, understood the importance of autonomous publishing but also because they linked autonomy to building a community of like-minded, Third World lesbian writers through the magazine and events it sponsored. Like contemporaneous Black feminist publications and the texts KTP would publish through 1992, through its publication, *Azalea* provided evidence of existing Black and Third World feminist consciousness and writing and also created new communities for its consumption.

In 1979 when *Azalea* held the first Third World Lesbian Writers Conference, and the Smith sisters were crafting their proposal for “Black Feminism: A Resource Book” and negotiating with Beacon Press, Barbara and Lorraine Bethel had been putting together and editing *Conditions 5*. These projects did not simply overlap; they appear to

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<sup>519</sup> “Publishing Ourselves.” *Azalea* 3.2 (Spring 1980), 45-46.

have been simultaneous. The Smith sister's proposal is dated July 2, 1979, while Smith and Bethel's introduction to *Conditions 5* is dated July 27 of that same year. In the same month, Barbara Smith was drafted a book proposal with her sister, took part in the Fifth Black Feminist Retreat, and completed the draft of *Conditions 5*.<sup>520</sup> This explosion of Black feminist creativity and publication, even though many of the envisioned publications were never printed, reflects and is part of an explosion of Black feminist activity at the end of the 1970s but in 1979 in particular.

A document created at the Fifth Retreat and disseminated along with notes from the closing discussion titled "Indications of Black Feminist Movement During the Past Year" lists twenty-three items that retreat participants had brainstormed as evidence of a growing Black Feminist Movement. Some are specific (e.g. "Expansion of women's studies program at Madison Park H.S. in Boston (Madison Park is a ghetto high school.)") but many are vague and generalized (e.g. "Third World Gay organizing links being made" and "Making connections with our children and mothers.") There are several items related to publishing on the list including three special issues devoted to Third World Women in *off our backs*, *Heresies*, and *Conditions*, as well as several Black feminist cultural performances, Black feminist academic activities, the existence of "a Black Women in Publishing group organizing in New York."<sup>521</sup> Curiously, *Azalea* is absent from this list, but the retreat women certainly knew of it and it is included in an

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<sup>520</sup> In a letter to Lorde dated June 23, 1979, Smith mentions that she is correcting the galleys for this issue and that the editors wanted to send it to the printers by July 15. Since the introduction is dated over a week later, I assume she and Bethel missed this deadline and that they continued finalizing the issue through the end of the month.

<sup>521</sup> "Indications of Black Feminist Movement During the Past Year." Box 47, Folder 14. Audre Lorde Papers. Spelman College Archive.

expanded and updated version of this list in the 1982 introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*.

I would add to this list that in 1979 Michele Wallace publishes her Black feminist treatise *Black Macho & the Myth of the Superwoman*; partly in response to Robert Staples's incendiary takedown of Wallace's book, *The Black Scholar* publishes a special issue on "The Black Sexism Debate" that includes a section titled "Feminism & Black Liberation," featuring writing by Lorde and Ntozake Shange; Doubleday publishes the anthology *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* edited by Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall; and the first Third World Lesbian Writers' Conference is held in New York as a benefit for *AZALEA: A Magazine by Third World Lesbians*, which was founded and edited by three Black women. Not only were Black feminists' activism and organizing becoming more visible and more explicit, the cultural production, especially publishing, generated by their movement was growing quickly.

Neither the Sisterhood nor the women of the Black Feminist Retreats ever produced the publications they envisioned, or as Gumbs puts it, "such a book was never produced by this configuration of women."<sup>522</sup> But their visions for their publications recognized the importance of an independent press for producing and disseminating Black feminist thought. Both unrealized books were the predecessors of groundbreaking Black feminist collections like *Conditions 5*. And these publications were groundbreaking, not just because they were necessary but because they were desperately

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<sup>522</sup> Gumbs 464



needed. For example, the first run of *Conditions Five* sold three thousand copies during the first year it was available. Only five thousand total copies had initially been ordered and the journal had to do a second printing of two thousand issues before the end of the year in order to meet the demand. That volume of printing, much less in such a short period of time, was unheard of for an independent feminist publication. The response made clear that, as Smith put it, “people not only wanted such a collection but they *needed* it to fill a tremendous gap.”<sup>523</sup> And Black feminists and their presses were key to meeting this need.

After the *Conditions* collective decided not to do another printing of the issue, Smith set out to find a publisher for “a slightly revised version of the original.”<sup>524</sup> The “slightly revised” version ended up being significantly changed, expanded, and retitled *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Although it was initially meant to be published by Persephone Press, an independent feminist press run largely by white women, the closing of the press in 1983 left the book in limbo. KTP stepped into the breach and published the anthology. KTP also acquired the rights to the trailblazing anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, which Persephone had been publishing.<sup>525</sup> According to Smith, “at the time Persephone had four or five books by women of color either in print or

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<sup>523</sup> Barbara Smith, “Introduction,” *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 1.

<sup>524</sup> *ibid* li

<sup>525</sup> See Enzser (2013) for an excellent organizational history of KTP and its publishing history.

accepted for publication.” Without the intervention of KTP, she claims, “*Home Girls* might never had existed, and *Bridge* might have been a memory.”<sup>526</sup>

Black feminist publishing and KTP in particular provided the tools to continue and grow Black feminism into the 1980s. The inclusive turn to include all women of color or Third World women in their publications meant that their venues also ensured that the words of other non-white women were available. These texts generated excitement and pleasure for both publishers and readers. But the work was arduous, financial and logistical issues eventually led Smith to step away from KTP and likely caused the end of *Azalea*.<sup>527</sup> The loss of these institutions was tragic. Smith has said that she does not like discussing the demise of KTP “because it is no more.”<sup>528</sup> And indeed that loss is felt and reverberates forward in time. But, at the risk of bordering on a triumphant narrative, that these organizations and publications existed is why Black feminism as an intellectual and activist tradition continues to exist today. The Black feminist texts they produced are the foremothers to the many, many more published since. The dual urges—activism and sisterhood—that inspired their work continue to animate contemporary Black feminist discourse.

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<sup>526</sup> Tricia Lootens, “Third National Women in Print Conference,” *off our backs* 15, no. 8 (September 30, 1985): 8.

<sup>527</sup> The most extensive collection of issues I have discovered is held by the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY. Their collection ends with vol. 5, no. 1, published in 1983.

<sup>528</sup> Barbara Smith, interview by Loretta Ross, transcript of videorecording, 76.

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